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**Parenting Capacity and Reading with Children: Enhancing the
Assessment Framework for Children in Need and their Families**

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B.A. English and European Literature

Diploma in Social Administration and Social Work

Submission for the degree of PhD

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Contents

List of Appendices and Tables	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
Chapters	
1. Parenting capacity, children's literature and the Assessment Framework	4
2. Parenting capacity: dimensions and enhancement	19
3. Children's literature and parenting capacity: stories, doors and windows to another dimension	52
4. Methodology	89
5. Characteristics of the samples: data from the baseline survey	112
6. Basic care, ensuring safety, emotional warmth: parents' views	129
7. Stimulation, guidance and boundaries and stability: parents' views	164
8. Children and parents reading books together: parents' views	198
9. Shirley Hughes illustrations: parents' views	232
10. Parenting capacity, reading with children, social work with vulnerable children and their families: some connections	262
Conclusion and recommendations	290
Appendices, including Part C illustrations	294
Tables	318
References	327
Postscript	

List of Appendices and Tables

Appendix 1

The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families: diagram and summary of dimensions

Appendix 2

Research instruments: Parts A, B, C, D including three illustrations from books by Shirley Hughes.

Appendix 3

Information from the Public Lending Right 1999 and 2005.

Appendix 4

Data analysis of research instrument Part D: demographic data

Appendix 5

Consent form

Appendix 6

Data analysis of research instrument part A

Table 1

Responses of all parents to the question, 'What things should a parent try never to do?'

Table 2

Books read with children by their parents.

Table 3

Sources of books read to children by the parents.

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Abstract

This thesis draws together two strands of thinking to consider their usefulness, when combined, to vulnerable children, their parents and practitioners who work in children's services. One strand conceptualises the abilities and qualities required by a parent to respond to children's developmental needs, as summarised by the term 'parenting capacity', in the psychological and social work literature which underpins assessment and intervention frameworks for practitioners. The second strand is the psychological and educational literature which considers the contribution of reading children's books to child development and the benefits to child-parent relationships of reading together.

Both literatures draw from common knowledge, informed from research into the developmental needs of children and the abilities parents need to raise them. There is also contemporary research and scholarship which interprets the relevance of this heritage in contemporary cultural contexts. To add to and link these understandings, this study explores and discusses the views of 33 contemporary parents. Their views on both what makes for a good parent and the benefits of reading with children were gathered.

The parents' views were analysed within the paradigm of the parenting capacity dimensions of *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families*, published as government guidance to practitioners in 2000 (Department of Health et al. 2000), which remains relevant to children's services in 2006. The use of this framework which draws mainly from one of the strands of literature that is explored (psychological and social work) means that the second strand of thinking (psychological and education) can be brought into the framework and relevant connections and comparisons made, in order to enhance the understanding of parenting capacity contained there. The study concludes by considering how the findings from this analysis have relevance to child welfare practice in contemporary contexts.

Introduction

The thesis seeks first to establish the extent to which a sample of parents can identify with the parenting capacity domains of *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (Department of Health et al. 2000, hereafter referred to as the Assessment Framework). Second, the same parents' views on reading with their children are ascertained in order to assess to what extent the activity of reading with children can bring fresh understandings of the Assessment Framework dimensions. Third, the same parents were asked to respond to some illustrations drawn by Shirley Hughes, to test the extent to which this pictorial method of communication might help parents to further express their understanding of parenting.

All the data thus gathered is analysed in relation to the Assessment Framework to assess the extent to which bringing together the assessment of parenting capacity and reading with children can enhance parents' and practitioners' understandings of parenting capacity, and yield useful insights for policy and practice. Thus the thesis explores the extent to which combining these knowledge bases might add to the understanding that parents and practitioners have of parenting capacity dimensions.

While each person's data is analysed thematically in relation to the Assessment Framework, the data is also considered in the context of the interviewee's personal or biographical circumstances as given in the interviews. This is to identify the main trends, and opinions about good parenting and reading with children, while not losing sight of individual circumstances that might be contributing to or impacting on the person's perspective.

Chapter 1 introduces the background to the research, the policy contexts and drivers which led to the development of *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (Department of Health et al., 2000). It outlines current policy contexts and the possible contribution of the study to some aspects of the government's *Every Child Matters: change for children* agenda (Department for Education and Skills, 2003a, 2003b, 2004b).

Chapter 2 considers definitions of parenting and parenting capacity. In particular it explores the areas of parenting capacity discussed in professional social work and social care literature. It examines the extent to which parenting capacity may or may not be enhanced through child welfare practitioner intervention.

Chapter 3 reviews the developmental literature from psychology and education which examines the role of children's books in children's lives and their growth to maturity. It considers the benefits to children of reading with a parent or other adult, and the theoretical connections to theories of human growth and development as understood by social workers.

Chapter 4 presents the methodology for the research, outlining how the study was designed and carried out. It gives the rationale for the way the parents were recruited to take part in the study, the design of the research instruments, the methods of data collection and analysis.

Chapter 5 presents the outcome from the baseline survey and discusses some characteristics of the samples.

Chapter 6 presents the analysis of the parents' views of three aspects of the parenting capacity dimensions in *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* - basic care, ensuring safety and emotional warmth.

Chapter 7 presents the analysis of the parents' views of a further three aspects of the parenting capacity dimensions in *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* - stimulation, guidance and boundaries and stability.

Chapter 8 extends the discussion of the parenting capacity dimensions by analysing the connections between the parents' views on the six dimensions and the contribution that a discussion of reading with children makes to enhancing and broadening that understanding.

Chapter 9 provides a further perspective on working with parents to ascertain their views when using *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* or undertaking other work on parenting. It analyses the data produced by using an interview technique where the parents responded to some illustrations of parent-child interactions taken from children's picture books.

Chapter 10 considers the findings from the study and some implications for practitioners in contemporary policy contexts. This includes the main findings from the parents' views on the dimensions in *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* concerning parenting capacity and their views on the benefits of reading with their children. The findings are situated in the context of the *Every Child Matters* agenda and the place of literacies in children's development. Chapter 10 is followed by a conclusion and some recommendations.

Chapter 1

Parenting capacity, children's literature and the Assessment Framework.

Introduction

This chapter outlines some of the policy contexts for social work assessment and intervention with vulnerable children and their families which have been developing since 1999 and how they provide the context for this study.

Parenting

Being a parent or taking on the task of parenting is a demanding role, physically, emotionally and cognitively. However it originates, it involves complex psychological attachments, physical and economic demands and responsibilities. It draws on personal resources, skills, abilities and qualities. There is little formal training. Most people simply pass on the parenting they learned in their family of origin, thus transmitting their culture and values. Others try to avoid what their parents or carers did to them, because of the harm they experienced. For many, childhood is a mixed experience and many aspire to provide something better for their children.

Writers such as Maluccio (1997) have asserted that the majority of parents are well motivated towards their children and can raise them with the right support. There is nothing in the sample of parents interviewed for this study which contradicts that. All the participants were highly motivated towards meeting their children's needs. What can be questioned is how they might maintain the capacity to match the motivation and whether, if they needed support, the right help would be available at the right time.

The capacity of an adult to respond to a child's needs is influenced by the temperament and responses of each child, the caregiver's own background, and the impact of external circumstances, resources and opportunities (Aldgate et al., 2006). Insight into your own inner world is coupled irrevocably with specificities of time, place, ethnicity and culture and other social, economic and individual factors. When things are apparently going well, parents simply get on with their lives drawing from personal resources and support from family and communities. However when things are not working out well support, advice and guidance may be needed from social workers, health, education or other child welfare professionals.

In situations where significant harm or the likelihood of significant harm (Children Act, 1989) is confirmed, the state may intervene to safeguard children and provide substitute care. Therefore, social workers and other practitioners need to understand what kind of parenting can be damaging and unhelpful to children, and what kind of parenting enhances the healthy development of babies, children and young people (Children Act s.17 (10)). They need to understand a range of theories and methods which they can offer to families both to support parents and to know what will keep children safe. It is from this that they can give an account of their reasons for taking, or not taking, action (Parton, 1997, 1998). Families are diverse, and it is not good enough to make assessments based on personal assumptions and experiences.

There is also an industry of books that advise parents on child rearing, and each generation has 'gurus' from Dr Spock, through Hugh Jolly (1983), Penelope Leach (1997), to the rise of Gina Ford (2001) and the rediscovery of Dr Spock (2004). The existence and sales of these baby rearing manuals indicates that each generation of parents seeks their own responses to a universal need to obtain some information about how to raise children. There is also an extremely extensive child development literature, and

summaries of it, available to practitioners (Seden, 2001a, 2006) including inputs from sociology, psychology and social policy.

Social work assessments

Social workers and their employers work within law and guidelines produced by regulatory government departments, which have published practice guidance, informed by research, about the needs of children, the parents' (or carers') capacity to meet children's needs, and the influence of extended kin and social environments. They have also produced detailed records for assessing, planning and intervening which are used in practice. Assessment (including the assessment of parenting capacity) is an activity which encompasses processes and actions during which practitioners draw on a range of evidence from different sources. As the guidance accompanying the Assessment Framework suggests:

Collecting information which will help explain what is happening to a child and their family and making sense of that information are key tasks in the assessment process. They require knowledge, confidence and skill for application in practice, underpinned by regular training and professional supervision. Materials which help structure practitioners' thinking about the complex worlds of the families with whom they work; and which then assist them to record systematically and consistently what they have seen and heard, and in their analysis and formulation of appropriate plans, can make a significant contribution to the development of high quality work. Good tools cannot substitute for good practice, but good practice and good tools together can achieve excellence.

(Department of Health, 2000: 113)

Protecting Children: a Guide for Social Workers Undertaking a Comprehensive Assessment, known as 'The Orange Book' (Department of Health, 1988), took a

developmental approach to assessment. Written before the Children Act 1989, in response to a series of child abuse inquiries and inspections, it had a narrower focus to childhood difficulties, focusing more on individual deficits and in depth family histories, in line with conventional casework principles. It was also only intended to be used when serious difficulties had led practitioners to conclude that a comprehensive and in-depth assessment was needed, in order to safeguard children, where child protection concerns had already been identified.

In 2000, the 'Orange Book' was replaced by an ecologically based developmental framework for assessment issued by The Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment and the Home Office under s.7 of the Local Government Act 1970. This was *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (hereafter referred to as the Assessment Framework). This was also accompanied by detailed practice guidance for child welfare practitioners.

The new publication, underpinned by several research studies and other research evidence, suggested a more inclusive approach was needed. *Child Protection: Messages from Research* (Department of Health, 1995) was particularly influential in showing the extent to which children and families experiencing difficulties were being funnelled through a narrow instrumental approach within the child protection system. This meant that the majority of families were being filtered out of the system without a proper assessment or the provision of services.

A literature review (Seden, 2001a) contributed towards the development of the new Assessment Framework by identifying key literature and research studies which already provided knowledge for social workers undertaking assessments. The implementation of the Assessment Framework, with its three domains, of child's developmental needs, parenting capacity and family and environmental factors was a response to a range of

concerns. There have been other developments since, particularly in the area of providing more underpinning evidence for practice (Aldgate et al., 2006; Cleaver et al. 2004; Horwath, 2001; Jack and Gill, 2003; Ward and Rose, 2002). These publications provide materials directly relevant to the assessment of individual children, parental capacity, and community resources. They also examine key concepts such as resilience and attachment.

These developments in assessment were to address concerns in inquiries, inspection reports (Department of Health, 1991) and research studies (Department of Health, 1995, 2001). There were concerns that assessments were not carried out in a timely manner and that comprehensive assessments of the needs of children were not undertaken or were undertaken mechanistically (Seden, 2006), and that following the assessment, families did not receive the services which would address their needs (Wilding and Thoburn, 1997).

In particular, despite the fact that children were often known to a range of agencies through the universal services, professionals were still failing to work together to provide additional services to children who needed them. The new framework identified knowledge bases that might help professionals to share their understandings of what children need, to identify the contribution of each person or agency, and to plan services together to improve children's lives. The Children Act 2004 (s10) now requires agencies to cooperate to improve children's well-being.

Inquiry reports and SSI (Social Services Inspectorate) inspections also noted the absence of assessments from children's files (Department of Health, 1991, 2001; Social Services Inspectorate, 1997) and the poor quality of assessments which tended to stipulate short-term objectives rather than sustainable support. *The Children Act Now* (Department of Health, 2001: 118-120) identified poor quality assessments, service led interventions, and a lack of ability to work with the complexity of children's lives. There is continuing concern

about social workers' inability to analyse the information they gather (Cleaver et al., 2003, 2004; Munro, 1998, 1999, 2002) and their subsequent decisions (Jones et al., 2006).

Reder, Duncan and Gray (1993) examined thirty-five major inquiries and concluded that a more sophisticated level of analysis which links assessment to intervention is needed.

The early implementation of the Assessment Framework in England was accompanied by blocks and barriers at local level (Horwath, 2002). Cleaver et al. (2004) identified the factors that contributed to successful implementation including: a good structure for recording information; a more holistic understanding of the child's needs and circumstances; a greater clarity over the roles and responsibilities of the agencies, and a greater willingness to share information between agencies.

Further work evaluating the implementation and impact of the framework has been published (Cleaver et al., 2004; Horwath, 2002; Preston-Shoot and Wigley, 2005; Stevenson, 2005). There have been some concerns about the framework and its use in practice, and it remains the case that, whatever tools are used, effective assessments depend on: the relationship between the assessor and the person(s) being assessed; the extent to which service users are active in the process; and the informed judgements of the professional who makes sense of the information gathered (Calder and Hackett, 2003; Garrett, 2003; Holland, 2000, 2004).

While the framework itself provides a broad theoretical construct for thinking about the needs of children in the context of family and community, there is still a tendency for practitioners to treat it as a checklist, rather than working in partnership with parents to work out areas for change (Spratt, 2001). Some practitioners still impose the framework on the family, rather than draw from it to assess the child and family's situation and plan interventions as needed. It is probably also the case that some practitioners are still not considering children and their families and situations holistically (Holland, 2004).

However, where the Assessment Framework is used as part of a partnership approach, there is some evidence that practitioners and families can use it together effectively (Joyce, 2003). It has also been suggested that the use of the Assessment Framework has provided a beneficial form of practice that helps practitioners to balance child protection, child welfare and their relationships with parents (Platt, 2006).

While some have argued that there is not enough attention to risk assessment (Cooper, 2003; Calder and Hackett, 2003) others argue that in practice the opposite is the case, and that despite the emphasis on family support there is a risk that narrow approaches to assessment remain the focus (Spratt, 2001). It has also been suggested that 'there is a lack of guidance on how the different dimensions interact' and that 'parents' capacity to parent should be given greater emphasis in child protection assessments' (Gough and Stanley, 2004: 1-3). Others welcome the tools that are available to practitioners, but are concerned about the ability of practitioners to use such frameworks flexibly and holistically with families. The weakest area remains analysis, and practitioners still struggle to construct meaning from information and to plan accordingly (Cleaver et al., 2004; Holland, 2000, 2004; Jones et al., 2006).

Munro (2002) explores ways of developing better analytical skills by examining the links between professional judgement, intuition, care and analysis. Holland (2004) links the processes of qualitative research analysis and social work analysis in assessment, suggesting that practitioners and researchers can take similar approaches to qualitative judgements. Calder and Hackett (2003) promote a 'step-wise' process. Jones et al. (2006) explore the personal and professional factors which contribute to flexible judgements and decision making. These authors argue for reflective practice which leads from information gathered to workable plans for improving the child's situation.

Another key concern is the inability of practitioners to draw from developmental literature, to see children's lives in the round and to connect this information, when gathered, with plans made. The considerations in this thesis, therefore, do not link to the instrumental concerns about assessment processes, but rather to the issues of understanding parents' responses to children's developmental needs holistically, and of learning to work across agency boundaries by using a universal and commonplace experience to enhance a child's well-being. It may also be that there is scope for adding to the ways practitioners understand the Assessment Framework dimensions by listening to parents' views and reflecting on how the parents understand the parenting capacity dimensions of the Assessment Framework and how they consider that reading with their children contributes to their parenting.

Changing structures for assessments in children's services

The organisational arrangements for providing services to children and their families are changing with the introduction of Children's Trusts and Local Safeguarding Children Boards under the Children Act 2004. Government intentions are laid out in papers issued by the Department for Education and Skills. These are *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003a, 2003b), *Every Child Matters: next steps* (Department for Education and Skills, 2004a) and *Every Child Matters: change for children* (Department for Education and Skills, 2004b).

Core knowledge and skills for all practitioners who work with children and families include the ability to recognise when a child or young person has additional needs, and to identify appropriate sources of help. The Common Assessment Framework (Department for Education and Skills, 2005) is, therefore, being developed as part of the programme of work to intervene earlier and ensure all families get the help they require. It is a nationally standardised approach to assist practitioners in any agency to assess and

decide how best to meet the additional needs of a child. The Common Assessment Framework is intended to:

- ***support earlier intervention***, by providing methods to help practitioners who come into day-to-day contact with children and families, such as those providing ante and post-natal services or those in early years settings and schools, to identify and meet unmet needs at an earlier stage;
- ***improve multi-agency working***, by enabling lead professionals to maintain a single, overview record of the needs and progress of a child in contact with several agencies; embedding a common language of assessment, need and response; and improving trust, communications and information sharing between practitioners;
- ***reduce bureaucracy for families***, by providing practitioners (including lead professionals) with a fuller overview of a child's needs and responses, thereby reducing the number of inappropriate inter-agency referrals, separate assessments and different agencies working with the child.

(Department for Education and Skills, 2005: 3).

If a child is found to have urgent or complex needs requiring specialist assessment and intervention, information from the common assessment will feed into the specialist assessment processes in relevant agencies. The *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (Department of Health et al., 2000) retains a specific focus on children in need, as defined by the Children Act 1989 and the assessment of Care Leavers (The Children (Leaving Care) Act, 2000). The Common Assessment Framework (Department for Education and Skills, 2005) focuses on a broader group of children who have additional needs and require early intervention. *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (Department of Health et al., 2000) and the associated practice guidance also provide a framework for practice informed by

research. The underpinning principles provide a common conceptual underpinning for the whole of the Integrated Children's System, including the Common Assessment Framework, when implemented in August 2006. These are that assessments:

- *are child-centred;*
- *are rooted in child development;*
- *are ecological in their approach;*
- *ensure equality of opportunity;*
- *involve working with children and their families;*
- *build on strengths as well as identify difficulties;*
- *are inter-agency in their approach to assessment and the provision of services;*
- *are a continuing process not a single event;*
- *are carried out in parallel with other action and providing a service;*
- *are grounded in evidence-based knowledge.*

(Department of Health et al., 2000: 10)

These principles have now been incorporated into the s.11 guidance on safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children (HM Government, 2005) and the revised *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (Department of Health et al., 2006). They provide a value base for all professional activity between the agencies and individuals who are responsible for working with children and their families. For children in need, the focus of assessment is the three Assessment Framework domains: the inter-relationship between the individual child's needs, the carers' or parents' capacity to respond to the child's needs appropriately and safeguard him or her from harm, and the impact of wider family history and environmental factors (Department of Health et al., 2000; Seden, 2001a; Ward and Rose, 2002; Winnicott, 1984, 1985). Therefore, the underpinning principles of *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (Department of Health et al.,

2000) and the associated guidance remain relevant and apply despite developments in organisations and frameworks.

In practice, the three domains of the Assessment Framework interact. For example good parenting can be made difficult by poor environments and poverty, while a questionable parenting style may be less damaging to a child where there are other compensatory factors such as a caring school environment or supportive wider family. Thus the framework is not a checklist but a theoretical construct within which to consider the factors that are helpful or unhelpful to the development of individual children, from which a balanced plan can be made (see Appendix 1). The dimensions to be considered in each of the three domains are:

Child's developmental needs

Health

Education

Emotional and Behavioural Development

Identity

Family and Social Relationships

Social Presentation

Self Care Skills

Parenting capacity to respond to a child's needs

Basic Care

Ensuring Safety

Emotional Warmth

Stimulation

Guidance and Boundaries

Stability

Family and environmental factors.

Family History and Functioning

Wider Family

Housing

Employment

Income

Family's Social Integration

Community Resources

(Department of Health et al., 2000: 19-23)

Therefore, while this study focuses on the domain 'parenting capacity', and the dimensions identified within it, the other two domains will continue to be present as background, and will come into play from time to time as relevant.

Enhancing the Assessment Framework's dimensions?

This study starts from the Assessment Framework with its three domains. However, it moves on to consider possibilities for developing the way the parenting capacity dimensions for responding to children's needs might be understood. This is done by first, asking a sample of parents their views and ascertaining their understandings of the parenting capacity dimensions. Second, by considering the possibilities of another dimension, the experiences that children and parents have while reading together.

The parenting capacity literature used by social workers is discussed further in Chapter 2, but in Chapter 3 another strand of literature is discussed to show how educational theorists suggest that, reading with children and the benefits that come from this is essential for the developing child and to the relationship between parent and child. Thus by bringing these two strands of literature and the parents' views together, for analysis in

the context of the Assessment Framework dimensions, the extent to which these can be integrated to enhance the domain 'parenting capacity' is examined.

Social work has tended to see reading with children as the province of education, unless special books are used for therapeutic purposes. However this study questions whether this simple split can be made. Literacy might be the province of schools and parents and children, but it is anticipated that maybe the ordinary pleasure and benefits of shared reading belong more fundamentally to an understanding of parenting that meets a child's needs. If enhancement of the child's relationship with their carers, and the child's own development, can be gained through children's books, then perhaps social workers need to consider the extent to which this might be considered in their assessments, interventions and direct work with children and their families.

The benefits to parents and children from reading together, cited in the relevant literature, are complex and nuanced, and yet perhaps could be harnessed to the service of enhancing parenting capacity. The study starts from the assumption that reading with a child is an ordinary and commonplace activity in most families, often linked to the family's desire for children to do well in school. It also assumes that most children and parents enjoy reading together, and that books offer both new and different ways of knowing about every day events, escapism, imaginative worlds, entertainment and the opportunity to experience life from other perspectives. Books may also offer opportunities to empathise with others, and ideas for aspiration.

Books in many families also appear to be useful for direct and indirect communication on a range of issues (starting school; being adopted; moving home; understanding death). The small book, which can be carried about, the pages turned and re-turned, pored over and shared together with a child at home, at bedtime, in cars, in the park, on a bus, seems to offer a different and more intimate experience than television and other media,

which keeps it central to many special times in children's and parents' lives, such as bedtime and holidays.

For many adults, sharing a book with a child is a pleasurable experience, and the literature in education and psychology illuminates how books are both a 'mirror to nature' and a way of adults and children exploring together the links between their own 'outer' and 'inner' worlds. This power is recognised in education settings, and the enhancement of children's literacy has been a preoccupation, since the 1990s, of the Labour government in England (Department for Education and Skills and National Literacy Trust, 2006). Linked to this is the knowledge of the way literacy might improve a child's opportunities and life chances, especially when starting from some disadvantage, and it may not be possible to separate the extent of someone's capacity to read and enjoy books with their children from their background, culture and opportunity.

By contrast, the climate for children's services in the early part of the twenty-first century has become, to a large extent, target driven and performance managed. Managers have found this has challenged the way they provide services and supervise practitioners (Henderson and Seden, 2004). This managerial context for practice tends to lead practitioners to be instrumental in their relationships with families rather than be creative and imaginative. This instrumentalism flies in the face of what families say they want from practitioners. Parents consistently look for good relationships, warmth and knowledgeable support from practitioners (Prior et al., 1999). They are concerned about losing control and being stigmatised by their involvement with child welfare agencies (Department of Health, 2000: 12).

Research studies over time have clearly indicated what people value from services and professionals. Aldgate and Statham (Department of Health, 2001: 95) summarised findings on children's views from a group of research studies and identified as important:

reliability, practical help, support, time to listen and respond, and seeing children's lives in the round. They also noted the successful features of partnership with parents (2001: 67). Assessments leading to better outcomes depend on the professionals' capacity to involve parents and children in direct work through relationships (Aldgate and Simmonds, 1988; Aldgate and Seden, 2006; Crompton, 1990; Jones, 2001, 2003; NSPCC et al., 1997).

Summary

This chapter has explored the policy contexts for social work assessments and interventions in the lives of children and families. It has suggested that despite the introduction of an Assessment Framework which is an ecological tool for making holistic assessments, there is still a tendency for some practitioners to take a checklist approach. It has also suggested that social work literature on parenting and parenting capacity, unlike the literature in education, pays scant attention to the usefulness of books for children and their families, or to the ways social workers and other practitioners can capitalise on this.

The study, therefore, first explores whether a sample of parents can identify with the dimensions of parenting capacity (Department of Health et al., 2000) and what they might add to those. Second, it explores, in the context of the dimensions and the parents' views on them, what the same parents say about reading with their own children, and what the activity contributes to their understanding of parenting. Finally, the practice and policy implications of what they say for social work with vulnerable children and their families are discussed in policy contexts shaped by the Children Acts 1989 and 2004.

The next chapter starts this exploration by further considering the literature relating to the dimensions of the domain 'parenting capacity'.

Chapter 2

Parenting capacity: dimensions and enhancement

They fuck you up your mum and dad,

They may not mean to, but they do.

They fill you with the faults they had,

And add some extra just for you.

(Philip Larkin 1922-80, This Be the Verse, *The Nations Favourite Poems*, BBC Publications, 1996: 94)

Introduction

This chapter explores the concept of parenting capacity, and considers whether parenting capacity can be enhanced. Philip Larkin is famous for his very deterministic view of parenting. He is so pessimistic that he continues, 'get out as early as you can, and don't have any kids yourself'. He was following a contemporary trend in psychotherapy to attribute power to parents to 'mess up' their children's lives and personalities. The culture then (1940s-1970s) tended to lean, in psychiatry at least, on the side of parental influence being more influential than the child's genetic inheritance and temperament. Others might feel very different about parental influences and could have written they 'tuck you up' or that parent's 'fill you with the love they had'. In this thesis the term 'parenting capacity' is always considered to be shorthand for the ability of parents to respond appropriately to the needs of individual children.

Parenting capacity in the twenty-first century

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, parenting capacity is conceptualised in ways which emphasise the abilities of adults to meet children's needs. This is particularly the case in social work literature and policy documents. There is an accumulation, over the years

(Adcock and White, 1985, 1997; Black, 1990; Kelmer Pringle, 1980), of ideas about what makes for good parenting which is reflected together with findings from more recent work in the Assessment Framework, the accompanying guidance and tools for practice (Department of Health, 2000; Department of Health et al., 2000; Department of Health, Cox and Bentovim, 2000). These are written for social workers and other child welfare professionals who work in a range of situations. Equally there is a literature on what impairs parenting capacity, and guidance on what impacts adversely on children to make them more vulnerable not only as individuals but also through living in stressful circumstances (Department of Health et al., 2006: xvii, xviii).

Parents still have the opportunity to pass on to their children what was positive from their own childhood experiences as much as the negative and distressing. However, following Winnicott (1975, 1984) and Rutter (1981), modern theorists view the child's temperament (including genetic factors) and parenting capacity as equally significant parts of an interactive equation (Aldgate et al., 2006; Rutter et al., 1994; Rutter and Hay, 1994). The parent-child relationship is now usually viewed as something mutually constructed, with the child acting on the parent as much as the parent is shaping the child. Whether a mother, father or other kin cares for a child, the principle remains that the relationship between the parties is crucial. Children shape carers as much as they are moulded by their carers (Rutter, 1981).

Because parents were once seen as more powerful than children they were accorded parental rights in law. However, the concept of parental rights has incrementally been changed to parental responsibilities towards children (Seden, 2000). Also, the concept of children's rights to resources, to protection and to being heard (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) has shifted the way that parent-child interactions work out in practice and also the way that child care professionals respond to children. Modern legislation, and the

subsequent policy documents, emphasise children's views and parents' responsibilities more than parental rights (Seden, 2000).

Parents are responsible for meeting a child's needs as articulated in the Children Act 1989. However parents also have their own needs, and a consideration of parenting capacity has to take account of the factors that might mean that an individual can or cannot respond to their children appropriately. Assessments of parenting capacity therefore have to consider both parents' strengths and abilities, and also the difficulties they face. They should also consider what support or assistance may enhance the parents' ability to carry out their parental responsibility more autonomously.

Who is a parent and what is parenting?

This may seem obvious at first sight: you become a parent by having children and retain the role until death. However the ways this can occur are various. Establishing that you are a parent is not as easy for a male as it is for a female. The act of giving birth (maternity) can be proven more easily than the fact that you are a biological father (paternity), especially where the father is not married to the mother and/or the mother disputes the claim.

Reproductive technologies, which make surrogacy and donor insemination possible, have produced a whole raft of ways to become a biological parent. Others become parents by adopting or fostering, or by living with or marrying someone else with children (step-parenting).

Not every child has two heterosexual parents, one male and one female. Many children grow up with one committed parent (male or female) or with gay or lesbian parents. Others find themselves with several adults in parenting roles with them: mothers, fathers, step-parents, grandparents, childminders, foster carers. Therefore the word 'parent' is used here to include

anyone carrying out parenting roles and tasks, taking a substantial part in bringing up a particular child or children. In other words, they would identify themselves as a parent figure whether biological, step, adoptive parent, or a carer such as a foster carer, grandparent or other relative. Equally the term 'family' is used to refer to a range of diverse domestic arrangements which adults make and within which children are raised.

Parenting capacity defined

Parenting is a word commonly used to describe:

The performance of all the actions necessary to promote and support the physical, emotional, social and intellectual development of a child from infancy to adulthood.

(Jackson, 2000: 245)

However, this functional definition requires some extension and discussion. Parenting actions taken to meet the child's developmental needs (physical, emotional, social, intellectual, moral and spiritual) are diverse. They vary from child to child because each child is unique. For example, disabled children may have particular physical needs which are different from other children. Social needs vary from one culture to another, and intellectual development follows different pathways for children with conditions such as dyspraxia or dyslexia, or for 'gifted' children. Emotional needs also encompass a range of matters such as happiness, or grieving, or handling separation. Each child has his or her own unique combination of needs, which change in form and intensity over time according to the developmental stage the child has reached.

The parent's personal capacity or ability to meet and respond to diverse needs is more than functional, and some parents can be inspirational. Donald and Jureidini (2004) describing an

approach to the assessment of parenting in families where abuse has occurred, suggest that parenting capacity is best defined not as a list of concrete issues or functional dimensions but rather as:

The parents' ability to empathically understand and give priority to their children's needs.

(Donald and Jureidini, 2004: 5)

This makes the parents' ability to understand and respond sensitively to the challenges which their particular child's temperament and development pose central. This includes the impact of adverse experiences such as abuse or loss on the parent and the parent's capacity to:

...handle their own intrinsic characteristics which might impede their parenting capacity.

(Donald and Jureidini, 2004: 5)

This is a subtler approach to the concept of 'parenting' and 'capacity' because the empathic response, as defined in counselling literature (Seden, 2005), requires self-awareness regarding the adult's own emotional and psychological issues and the ability to set these aside in order to enter the psychological life space of the other person. The degree of empathic capacity which counsellors and other professionals develop for practice may be more than that required by the average parent, but to expect empathic understanding of children by parents is to look for a more fine-tuned way of responding than a functional definition requires. It anticipates that the parent 'uses the self' in empathic relationship with the child in a way that moves beyond sympathy to an ability to understand the child's feelings and perspectives accurately and separately from their own.

Such empathy can be contrasted with projective identification, where a parent may present themselves as emotionally competent and concerned, but cannot differentiate between their own needy feelings and the child's actual needs. This over identified attachment representation underlies some malfunctions in parenting such as factitious illness by proxy (Adshead and Bluglass, 2001). In the same way, a failure of identification with a child as a result of parental mental illness can lead to impaired parenting capacity (Parker et al., 1997; Tunnard, 2004). Therefore the ability to be, or become, empathic in an ordinary, related and reflective way can be a very important component of parenting (Reynolds, 2003). This will be further discussed when considering the place of literature and reading in developing the capacity for empathy in both children and adults.

Flexible and individual responses

Parents often recognise the need to be flexible. Those with more than one child speak of how different each child has been and how they needed to adapt and respond differently to each one. No two children, not even identical twins, take exactly the same developmental pathway. The ability to be flexible is dependent upon personal qualities, attributes and skills (capacities) which adults utilise to be responsive to children. This may be innate in the parent, but may have to be learned, adapted or developed in response to a particular child's needs, which can be challenging. Parenting capacity can only be assessed in relation to its impact on a particular child, since what is effective for one child may be partially or fully ineffective with another. There are also particular challenges for some parents.

Disabled children may have 'complex' or 'additional' needs yet still develop at their own rate and according to their abilities. Parents have to understand each child, their particular issues, contexts and experiences. Writing for practitioners, Marchant says:

Try not to make assumptions about what an impairment means for a child. Aim to understand the impact of the child's impairment from his or her perspective: what it means for this child in this situation and at this stage in his or her development, rather than in the abstract.

(Marchant, 2001: 218)

Parenting that understands each child's unique situation is demanding and challenging. It is not therefore surprising that parents often need advice and support. Research suggests that parents of disabled children can take the lead in identifying the best supports, with listening to children, cultural respect, multi-disciplinary working, socialisation and social inclusion remaining key concerns (Mitchell and Sloper, 2003: 1077). Many recently identified conditions can be puzzling for parents and professionals alike, for example autistic spectrum disorders (Harker, 2004).

Expecting parents to respond to any child's needs across a range of areas (physical, cognitive, psychosocial, emotional, social, moral and spiritual) is to ask them to carry out a complex set of tasks. Many parents simply never seek to explore the complexity of their responses to their children, which appear to come naturally and proceed happily. For some however the child's needs, and/or their own personal issues, bring particular challenges. However where parents' responses are not helpful and there are deficits for a child, such as emotional or physical neglect, this can have serious consequences (*Every Child Matters Research Briefing 10*; Turney and Tanner, 2001). All children need to be able to trust others to meet their needs, yet can easily blame themselves when things go wrong. They need to feel secure, loved and loveable if they are to become autonomous adults (Lindon, 1996).

Social work intervention

Social work and other practitioners must be able to assess and understand the child's temperament and associated developmental needs. This informs the crucial assessments and judgements concerning who is most able, psychologically, economically and physically, to meet a child's needs consistently enough. This may be the child's biological kin, with or without support. It may be foster or other substitute carers. Social work and other practitioners usually only become involved at the point where things are not working well between parents and child, and there is a request or referral for support or other intervention (see Parton 1997 for a discussion of the relationship between state and parents). To contribute to the decision making processes of agencies and courts, and to offer support for parents, practitioners need to be able to:

1. Understand the components of 'good enough parenting', and be able to assess the ability of adults in parenting roles to provide adequate care.
2. Recognise when a parent's capacity to meet a child's needs is impaired to the extent that the situation is so detrimental to the child's well-being that swift intervention is needed. This may be in the form of a support package, or a safer place to live, or a more competent parent for the child.
3. Be able to assess when, with the right kind of support, a parent's ability to meet their children's needs can be enhanced, and what kinds of intervention are most likely to bring this about.

This study is concerned with that aspect of family support which finds ways to assess and enhance the ability to parent. It follows Donald and Jureidini (2004) in identifying a difference between an instrumental and functional part of parenting capacity, and the need for an underpinning empathy. It also recognises the impact of each parent's own emotional

and psychological development on the capacity to parent. It assumes that, subject to assessments of safety, it is also important to harness the 'ordinary' and the 'commonplace' to intervene in the least stigmatising way possible to enhance parenting capacity. Later chapters will explore how parents' reading with their children might play a part in this.

One side of the triangle?

As stated in Chapter 1, the study is concerned with one domain of the Assessment Framework triangle, 'parenting capacity', and the dimensions identified there by researchers and policy makers. While the focus is on this one aspect of the Assessment Framework triangle, the others will always be kept in mind, as all three domains are very important in a child's developmental progression from vulnerable baby to adulthood. The relationship between child and parent is critical, but so are the child's own personal and individual attributes. The impact of environmental factors should not be underestimated either (Jack, 1997, 2000, 2002; Jack and Gill, 2003; Utting et al., 2001). A key role for parents is to bridge the interface between the needs of the child and the demands of the external world. An important part of parenting is helping the child to negotiate this transaction and become increasingly autonomous. In summary, the understanding of parenting capacity used here embodies three concepts:

1. The ability of a parent, as defined earlier, to function adequately in actions taken to meet the child's needs as defined by Jackson (2000), i.e. to carry out parenting tasks reasonably skilfully.
2. A parent's emotional and personal capacity to respond flexibly and empathically to each child's unique combination of characteristics in such a way that the child can develop their own potential.

3. The way parenting capacity is affected by ability, opportunity, culture, ethnic background, beliefs, values, poverty, disadvantage, and therefore, social and family policy. Bridging the child's entry to the wider world is a key role for parents.

This chapter now turns in more detail to policy contexts for assessing parenting capacity and continues by:

- Identifying the dimensions of parenting capacity in the Assessment Framework in more detail.
- Discussing some of the strands of knowledge that are relevant to practitioners' understandings of parenting capacity.

Dimensions of parenting capacity

Much that has informed practitioners over the years is enshrined in documentation used to assess the capacity to look after other people's children. The National Foster Care Association publishes guidance on assessment with the aim to ensure that all children and young people who are fostered receive the highest standards of care. Adcock and White's (1985) work on parenting has been widely used. This underpins the frameworks for assessing applicants to be foster carers, and other research considers how to train and equip them well for their role in handling some very complex child behaviours and difficulties (Gilkes and Klimes, 2003; Hindle, 2001; Puddy and Jackson, 2003).

The standards for applicants who apply to foster or adopt remain something of a gold standard for becoming a substitute parent, because of public accountability for these children, and the particular challenges involved in caring for children whose behaviour is affected by the adverse experiences that have brought them into placement. The standards

have also informed the Assessment Framework dimensions of parenting capacity. The action and progress records that social workers use with 'Looked After Children' (Parker et al., 1991; Ward, 1995) have been influential in shaping the Assessment Framework dimensions for children's developmental needs. Together these represent an accumulation of thinking, informed by research, about what children need and the capacity of parents to meet needs. In this study, the parenting capacity dimensions identified by the authors of the Assessment Framework and outlined by Jones (2001: 260-261) are used. These are:

Basic Care

Providing for the child's physical needs, and appropriate medical and dental care. Includes provision of food, drink, warmth, shelter, clean and appropriate clothing and adequate personal hygiene.

Ensuring Safety

Ensuring the child is adequately protected from harm or danger. Includes protection from significant harm or danger, and from contact with unsafe adults/other children and from self-harm. Recognition of hazards and danger both in the home and elsewhere.

Emotional Warmth

Ensuring the child's emotional needs are met and giving the child a sense of being specially valued and a positive sense of the child's own racial and cultural identity. Includes ensuring the child's requirements for secure, stable and affectionate relationships with significant adults, with appropriate sensitivity and responsiveness to the child's needs. Appropriate physical contact, comfort and cuddling sufficient to demonstrate warm regard, praise and encouragement.

Stimulation

Promoting the child's learning and intellectual development through encouragement and cognitive stimulation and promoting social opportunities. Includes facilitating the child's cognitive development and potential through interaction, communication, talking and responding to the child's language and questions, encouraging and joining the child's play, and promoting educational opportunities. Enabling the child to experience success and ensuring school attendance or equivalent opportunity. Facilitating the child to meet challenges of life.

Guidance and Boundaries

Enabling the child to regulate his or her own emotions and behaviour. The key parental tasks are demonstrating and modelling appropriate behaviour and control of emotions and interactions with others, and guidance which involves setting boundaries, so that the child is able to develop an internal model of moral values and conscience, and social behaviour appropriate for the society within which they will grow up. The aim is to enable children to grow into an autonomous adult, holding their own values, and able to demonstrate appropriate behaviour with others rather than having to be dependent on rules outside themselves. This includes not over-protecting children from exploratory and learning experiences. Includes social problem-solving, anger management, consideration for others, and effective discipline and shaping of behaviour.

Stability

Providing a sufficiently stable family environment to enable a child to develop and maintain a secure attachment to the primary caregiver(s) in order to ensure optimal development. Includes ensuring secure attachments are not disrupted, providing consistency of emotional warmth over time and responding in a similar manner to the

same behaviour. Parental responses change and develop according to child's developmental progress. In addition, ensuring children keep in contact with important family members and significant others.

These dimensions have been developed over time by drawing from psychology, sociology and social policy. Their provenance can also be traced historically from Maslow's hierarchy of need (1943), and subsequent research into 'good enough' parenting (Seden, 2001a). They therefore derive from other strands of contextual knowledge which have come to underpin developmental theorising about children's needs and parenting capacity in social work. These are discussed next.

Strands of contextual knowledge

Developmental psychology

It can be argued that most theorising about children's needs and parents' abilities to meet them rests on the foundation of developmental psychology, which has examined both basic human needs, and what parents should offer to nurture children. This extensive developmental literature includes the work of pioneer theorists such as Freud, Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg, Bowlby and those who have provided a synthesised body of knowledge about human growth and development (Bee, 1995; Mussen et al., 1990; Rutter and Hay, 1994; Rutter et al., 1994). Such work informs summaries of parenting qualities such as that provided by Aldgate and Coleman (1999: 10):

- *sufficient financial and material support to meet children's basic needs for food, warmth and shelter;*
- *an ability to protect children from danger;*

- *an understanding of children's needs at different ages and stages of development and taking pleasure from children's progress;*
- *the opportunity to be valued as an adult;*
- *an ability to access primary health care for self and children;*
- *an ability to support children's educational progress.*

This body of theorising underpins the Assessment Framework dimensions of parenting capacity as discussed by Jones (2001) and evaluated by the participants in this study. The dimensions of the Assessment Framework therefore derive from a researched, established and articulated knowledge base. In addition to considerations of parenting qualities, a further two considerations are embedded within any discussion of parenting capacities and children's needs. These are:

- Attachment (a sense of connectedness to your carers, kin and culture, which is reliable and sustaining).
- The value of parental empathy (parenting with a sensitive understanding of a child's situation).

Attachment and empathy

A good attachment is extremely important for children's development (Ainsworth, 1991) and clearly requires a person, or persons, willing to be the recipients and nurturers of such attachment. This is another area where there is much critical and useful study (Aldgate and Jones, 2006; Howe, 1995, 2001; Howe et al., 1999; Owusu-Bempah, 2006). The centrality of attachment means that the bonding from parent to child, sustained by parental empathy, emerges as another critical part of parenting capacity, and importantly for this study, one

that is enhanced when parents and children read together and together become attached to stories.

Much attention has been given to empathy in adult human relationships (Egan, 1990; Rogers, 1961; Seden, 2005) but less to measures of empathy between adults and children.

Rosenstein (1995) suggests that a measure of parental empathy should be part of the risk assessment tools used by child protection practitioners. Specifically she suggests (1995: 1358) that the following questions be added to parent/caretaker assessments and scored moderate, serious or severe:

- Is the parent able to individualise the child?
- Is the parent able to describe the child in terms of the child's needs?
- Does the parent expect the child to satisfy parental needs?

Rosenstein also links high levels of parental empathy with better outcomes for children. This is consistent with a view from Cameron (1997) who identified findings from child development work undertaken by Murray on the significance of parental empathy, and the impact on young children of parental empathy towards them being impaired by maternal depression (Murray, 1992; Puckering, 2005). Parental empathy is what enables a parent to be more than functionally competent and to be responsive to a particular child. It is a key factor in positive child self-identity from the earliest moments of a child's life (Reynolds, 2003). A parent who can establish relationship, and then base actions towards children on accurate empathy (not to be confused with sympathy) is more likely to understand and respond accurately to an individual child's needs. Conversely, parents who neglect their children may show little emotional understanding or responsive awareness of their children's needs (Edwards et al., 2005). Parental incapacity is therefore considered next.

Parental incapacity

Parents' responses to children are critical in showing them the extent to which they are loved and valued, and this provides the emotional environment for psychological development. It has therefore been important to social workers to identify both those situations which enhance a child's development, and also the parental factors which can impair it (Cleaver et al., 1999). The most usual formulation of this is to conceptualise the most severe harms as physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and failure to thrive (Department of Health, 1995: 99).

These broad categories summarise outcomes for children from damaging parental behaviours, attitudes and actions. When assessing each particular situation, precise consideration has to be given to: the meaning the child attributes to the parent's action; how the harm has been experienced by children; the extent to which the parent can be supported to parent well enough; whether the harm is such that a child should be safeguarded from that person and removed from the situation. The literature exploring parental behaviours and attitudes which harm children therefore usually relates to: determining the extent and impact of maltreatment (significant harm); deciding whether children should stay in the care of their parents; assessing whether children should be removed and then returned home; assessing what actions or supports might make it safe enough for children to remain at home with their parents; making assessments about contact or visits to parents from whom children are separated.

Professional and public anxiety about preventing serious abuse and child deaths has created an industry of checklists, indicators and predictors which claim to measure the safety of a child within a family (Jones et al., 2006; Seden, 2001a). *Working Together* (Department of

Health et al., 2006) summarises which areas practitioners should pay particular attention to in terms of parental incapacity impacting on children's circumstances. These are:

- *Families living in poverty.*
- *Families where there is domestic violence.*
- *Families where the parent has a mental illness.*
- *Families where a parent is misusing drugs or alcohol.*
- *Families where a parent has a learning disability.*
- *Families that face racism and other forms of social isolation.*
- *Families living in areas where there is high crime, poor housing and a lot of unemployment.*

(Department of Health, 2006: xvii)

These areas are now discussed under three headings:

- Domestic violence, mental illness, drugs and alcohol misuse.
- Parents who have a learning disability.
- Poverty, racism, other forms of social isolation and living in a poor area (social exclusion).

Domestic violence, mental illness, drugs and alcohol misuse

These are areas of parenting capacity where research has identified the possible adverse impact on children of certain parental circumstances or behaviour. Domestic violence is now understood to have a significant emotional impact on children in the short and long term, as well as to put them at physical risk of harm, by being caught in the crossfire of parental disputes (Brandon and Lewis, 1996; Farmer and Owen, 1995; Hemming et al., 1997;

Humphreys and Mullender, 2000; Jasinski and Kantor, 1997). Similarly research has studied the impact on children of parents who experience mental illness, especially depression, (Sheppard, 1993, 2002, 2003, 2005; Tunnard, 2004) or who misuse substances (Azzi-Lessing and Allen, 1996; Cleaver et al., 1999; Hayden, 2004; Kroll, 2004; Sheridan, 1995; Tunnard, 2002a, 2002b). The behaviours that parents exhibit when struggling with these issues and the strain put on children's circumstances have been increasingly evidenced, and the ways that parental incapacity might be damaging to children's development and well-being quantified. Therefore these are areas which need careful assessment, and attention paid to the exact detail of how the children can be safeguarded and their welfare promoted.

It is complex to judge the extent to which parenting capacity is impaired and children adversely affected, especially where children are attached to their parents. For example is continual verbal criticism more damaging than the occasional but light slap? How damaging is it to be your parent's carer? To what extent does positive parenting elsewhere (from other kin for example) mitigate the harm done? How much can children's resilience buffer them against adversity? Alongside the question of extent there is also the question of parental capacity for change. For example, a parent who uses alcohol may express a wish to change, but are they motivated enough or able to succeed? Parents' motivation and capacity to change or improve their parenting abilities, especially where a child appears attached to a parent, is therefore another key issue (Horwath and Morrison, 2001). How should practitioners understand the situation and work when children are neglected in their families? (Turney and Tanner, 2001; Tanner and Turney 2003).

Parents who have a learning disability

Social workers are often concerned about the ability of learning disabled parents to raise their children and to keep up with the children's developmental needs (Cotson et al., 2001). Swain

and Cameron (2003) argue that parents with any disability, including intellectual impairment, are more harshly judged than other parents on their capacity to care and that their research in Australia demonstrated this to be the case. McConnell and Llewellyn (2002) also raise concerns about a high rate of removal of children, from parents with intellectual impairment, as an outcome of their research into the legal system in Australia. They suggest that this is of equal concern worldwide. Booth and Booth (1996) argue that a presumption of incompetence leads to unnecessarily 'pessimistic judgements'. Sometimes prejudice and uncertainty underlie practitioners' concerns as much evidence. Booth and Booth (1993a, 1993b) argue the case for taking a 'capacity perspective' that understands the contexts of the parents' lives and upbringing.

Cotson et al. (2001) suggest that, where parenting may be lacking, sustained and appropriate supports can provide sufficient additional guidance, stimulation or basic care for the children concerned to remain with their parents. They conclude:

Parents with learning disabilities may continue to develop their skills and emotional strengths over time, but if they require additional support at the beginning of the child's life, then they are likely to need continuing support until the child becomes independent.

(Cotson et al., 2001: 301)

It is also worth noting here that physically disabled parents can equally find themselves subject to much scrutiny. Alison Lapper, a sculptor born without arms and now a mother, speaking on the radio programme *Woman's Hour* described her experience as 'having social services on your back before you even got started'. The challenge for practitioners will remain that of ensuring that child and parent strengths and needs, together with wider

community factors, are carefully balanced in assessments within processes where parents, whatever their own disability, can give their own views on their capacities and the support they need as parents (James, 2004).

Poverty, racism, other forms of social isolation and living in a poor area (social exclusion)

Bebbington and Miles (1989) identified that children living in disadvantaged circumstances were more likely to come into care than their counterparts. However many parents in impoverished circumstances display positive parental capacities. The challenge to social workers is to make sure that poverty alone, or disadvantage caused by socio-economic structures, is not a reason to remove children from parents, but rather a case where support is needed and also provided. There is no doubt that it is more difficult to be a parent when social isolation excludes you from the mainstream activities in society. This next section therefore discusses these issues as they affect some groups of parents, because of judgements that may be made about their parenting capacity on the basis of stereotyping.

Some groups of parents, for example ethnic minority families, refugee and asylum seeking families, travelling families, gay and lesbian parents, disabled parents, single parents and teenage mothers, may have their parenting capacity judged as inadequate from the start, simply on the basis of assumptions about their age, culture or lifestyle. A point emphasised in the principles accompanying the Children Act 1989 (Department of Health, 1990) and the practice guidance accompanying the Assessment Framework is that there is room for considerable diversity in family styles and that societal expectations of parents change over time. Thus when it comes to parenting capacity, every situation needs to be considered on its own merits.

The parenting capacity of lesbian and gay couples has been frequently questioned, yet when Flaks et al. (1995) undertook a comparative study of lesbian and heterosexual parents and their children, evaluating the children's cognitive functioning and behavioural adjustment and the parents' relationship, they found that the parents' sexual orientation in no way compromised their parenting capacity. The survey revealed no significant differences in the children or parenting, except that the lesbian couples showed more parenting awareness.

Families from particular ethnic or cultural groups may or may not have different styles of parenting, and/or varied family patterns according to culture and community or religious persuasion. Recognising racial and cultural diversity (Dutt and Phillips, 2000) adds richness to understanding what factors might promote a child's welfare. However, there has been a danger of people being viewed stereotypically in a range of ways. Ahmed et al. (1986: 3) underline three important areas in relation to the provision of welfare services for black children and their families:

- the importance of focusing on strengths;
- having an understanding of the politics of race and its impact on families and services;
- working for change which combats the impact of racism on individuals and families.

Therefore, one of the problems in conceptualising parenting capacity has been the assumptions that social workers bring to the work. For example, there has been a tendency to conclude that parents who are capable in some areas of their lives are adequately meeting all the needs of their children. The inquiry into the death of Jasmine Beckford, *A Child in Trust* (London Borough of Brent, 1985), revealed that social workers assumed that because

the father was in work, and the home was well cared for, the child was also well cared for. Similarly, other assumptions about a person's capacity to be a parent can be made on the basis of stereotypes without an adequate understanding of the particular parent's circumstances.

Minority ethnic groups remain under-represented as clients receiving preventive and supportive social services provision, but over-represented in those aspects of social services activity which involve social control (Chand, 2000; Lago and Thompson, 1996; Tunstill and Aldgate, 2000). Such considerations should not be used to explain away maltreatment. However, it is very important to consider the positive elements of parenting capacity within particular family groups, while taking care not to fall into the cultural relativism which fails to distinguish between abuse and cultural practices (Seden, 1995, 2001a).

The families of children with disabilities may experience social isolation and stress, especially if they are also in socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances. Sloper (1997), who explored the needs and circumstances of over a thousand parents caring for a severely disabled child, found that many families lacked support. This was particularly the case for single parents, minority ethnic group families, and the parents of the most severely disabled children. Assessments as to how much parenting capacity can be enhanced are critical for parents where there is a risk that the marginalisation they may already face, from societal prejudice and assumption, or from the pressure of their circumstances, will be increased through insensitive interventions.

Parental capacity, safeguarding and promoting child welfare

Identifying which elements of parental behaviour have the potential to harm children, and how they do this, continues to be important. Some children will need to be protected from

harm caused by their parents, but in most situations work can be done to support the family. It is often possible to identify what can be done to intervene, so that children can be protected and at the same time stay with parents to whom they are attached, provided the parents are as fully involved in the process as possible.

Woodcock (2003) and Holland (2000) both comment on the significance of the relationship between parents and practitioners on the outcomes of assessments and interventions. Spratt (2001) also describes how social workers still need agency endorsement to prioritise meeting needs over assessing risks. It seems that social workers still rely on instrumental approaches, perhaps not well applied, at the expense of innovative and creative solutions which respond in a negotiated way to individual situations. Family centres and family support projects are critical to working with parents to assess and to enhance parenting capacity in these situations. The possibilities for supporting and enhancing parenting capacity through partnership work with parents are the focus of the next section, and will become relevant to the later consideration of the benefits of reading with children.

Family support, parent training, enhancing parenting skills

Family support in partnership with parents, aimed at maintaining children safely at home with their own families and communities wherever it is possible, is central to public policy and is well researched (Aldgate and Tunstill, 1995; Colton et al., 1995; Smith, 1996; Thoburn et al., 1995; Tunstill and Aldgate, 2000). Family support includes a range of activities many of which are practical (for example, help with finances, housing, and education) and many of which aim to enhance the emotional capacity of parents to look after their children. With this in mind, the use of family support projects is included in the empirical part of the study.

Parenting and parenting programmes have been taken up and promoted by government. There is room for caution about the extent to which government involves itself in such work, as while the additional resourcing is to be welcomed, there is also the danger that if such projects become a tool of state intervention they may lose their spontaneity, their popularity with parents, and therefore their effectiveness with marginalised groups, especially if meeting performance measures or targets detracts from building supportive partnerships with parents.

However Ramchandani and McConachie (2005) note that parenting programmes are now part of a National Service Framework (Department of Health and Department for Education and Skills, 2004):

There are now a number of well-established parenting programmes, usually aimed at improving or preventing behavioural problems in younger children. Provision of these is a clear government priority in England and Wales ... Evidence-based parenting training programmes, focused on child behaviour management are available in each locality with a focus on improving parenting, delivered by professionals with specific training in this area

(Ramchandani and McConachie, 2005: 5)

Work done in family centres, schools, GP practices, and other community settings, to enhance parenting capacities is wide ranging. Such centres often provide parent training in a range of areas, and also supportive recreational activities for parents and opportunities for social interaction (for example, outings; meals, talks) and peer support. Some family centres specialise in family assessment and support where abuse has been identified, others provide a community based support service. There is also the availability of Sure Start and Home

Start, both designed to support parents with young children in their communities. Some centres focus on assessment (Pithouse et al., 2001) but others focus on education and support. Activities can include:

- parenting classes to educate parents about children's developmental needs;
- groups for parents to learn play activities for children;
- opportunities to learn how to help a child speak or socialise;
- the acquisition of skills for managing difficult child behaviours based on social learning theory;
- education on health or dietary issues;
- toy and book groups;
- parent support groups led by a practitioner;
- baby massage classes;
- peer support groups where parents can share problems and solutions;
- educational opportunities for parents (for example, computer skills);
- therapy (for example, counselling, psychotherapy, family therapy);
- facilitating self-awareness through group work or individual programmes;
- support for parents' motivation to change (for example, alcohol reduction groups, drug education programmes; anger management classes);
- psychiatric support for emotional, mental health and attachment problems.

These kinds of activity, undertaken by a range of professionals from education, health, social work and community work, all aim to enhance and support the ability to parent. Parent feedback is usually positive:

The fun and families groupwork programme is popular with parents, empowers parents and they feel that the service meets their needs.

(Townsend, community worker and author, in the foreword to Neville et al., 1996)

Nonetheless, there remains some debate concerning the extent to which family support strategies of various kinds are successful (Barlow et al., 2005; Johnson et al., 2005). Many studies evaluate projects and programmes, and reveal a diversity of methods for providing support, such as the parenting website described by Sarkadi and Bremberg (2005). This topic is extensive, but relevant to this study. Therefore this next section outlines some reported outcomes to argue that, while the variety and diversity of activity makes it difficult to prove the overall efficacy of programmes designed to improve parenting, many such projects appear to have positive outcomes. For example, remedying the effects of social exclusion and poverty through family support projects (Statham and Holtermann, 2004) appears more straightforward than enabling parents who maltreat children to interact more positively with their offspring (Gottlieb and Hughes, 2004), although many studies claim to have measured some gains (Ramchandani and McConachie, 2005). Projects are grouped here for discussion under three headings:

- Parent training (skills acquisition).
- Support for impaired parenting capacity.
- Family therapy approaches.

Parent training (skills acquisition)

This group of projects largely rely on the direct teaching of parenting skills, often using behavioural approaches. Many writers report positive outcomes from these methods

(Fernandez, 2004; Neville et al., 1996, 1998; Scott and Neill, 1996). Edwards is more critical and questions who benefits from such programmes:

... in perceiving parenting skills as a body of knowledge which can be taught, they (the professionals) provide and render visible a strategy for improving the lives of women and children with whom they work.

(Edwards, 1995: 257)

Edwards' concern is the extent to which such strategies simply reassure professionals and divert them from tackling the structural inequalities which may also be making the task of parenting difficult, and suggests that that parenting classes without complementary social policy strategies are not sufficient alone for parents who are socially disadvantaged.

The debate continues about the extent to which parenting skills can be taught and parenting capacity enhanced, and the cost effectiveness of such support. Reports of success in teaching basic skills also continue. Positive parenting programmes in schools and community based approaches are reported as effective (Angelini, 1994; Harrison et al., 2005; May et al., 1999; Shorey et al., 2003). Parenting programmes and intensive support are also cautiously viewed as effective with families who maltreat (Gottlieb and Hughes, 2004; Lyons et al., 2005). Increased support and helping people become more 'positive parents' is a much more challenging task.

Support for impaired parental capacity

Another group of studies report on work to improve parenting capacity where the parents' personal abilities and capabilities are impaired. Assessment of the capacity and motivation of any particular parent towards making the changes needed to enable them to be an effective

enough parent when mental ill health or their own experiences of deprivation are a factor is more complex. Sheppard (2002, 2003, 2005) continues to map the effects of maternal depression on mothers, the usefulness of professional interventions, and the way parents themselves devise coping strategies, flagging up the need for worker sensitivity in support work with the mothers. Seneviratne et al. (2003: 551) studied parents subject to psychiatric parenting assessments in mother and baby units and identified the mothers as a 'very vulnerable group.' They conclude that careful and individual multi-disciplinary assessments can lead to the best decisions and planning about mother and child remaining together. The use of multi-agency approaches is also noted by Sturge (2001).

Smith (2004) argues for intensive family support to mediate between the parental mental ill health and its impact on the child. Iwaniec and Sneddon (2002) suggest that individuals who failed to thrive as children need good support to avoid failure to thrive in the next generation. Hooper and Koprowska (2004) suggest an approach to supporting parents who have been sexually abused in childhood. Assessment of the capacities of learning disabled parents and the provision of appropriate support also remain the subject of professional activity (Cleaver and Nicholson, 2003; Olsen and Wates, 2003).

Capacity building approaches are recommended with caution (Drummond, 1998) as there are clear challenges for practitioners in making assessments and providing support, as outlined by Woodcock (2003) who expresses concern that social workers are not drawing on the key available psychological literature. Building parenting capacity with those who have experienced past extreme childhood adversity themselves, which may have contributed to their own present impaired parenting capacity, needs a range of sensitive strategies. The possible role of parent-child reading in enabling some parents to consider some of their own issues subliminally will be introduced later in this work.

Family therapy approaches

Another form of enhancement of parenting capacity is the family therapy approach. Family therapy, offered in some family support projects, health and child guidance centres, provides support and therapeutic activities directed at whole families. Family therapy practitioners have developed models for assessing family dynamics and systems (Gaudin et al., 1996; Hamilton and Orme, 1990; Miller et al., 1994). Such work aims to improve the family system's capacity in:

- problem solving abilities;
- communication patterns;
- family roles;
- affective communication;
- affective involvement;
- behaviour control.

Family therapy draws on psychodynamic, social learning and ecosystems theory to offer families ways to improve their functioning, including their parenting styles:

The term family therapy encompasses three things: an observational philosophy, an approach to treating problems in families and a number of methods of treatment. It considers problems in the context both of intimate relationships and of the wider social network of which the family is a part. The aim of treatment is to bring about a change in interactions between dysfunctionally connected parts of a social system. (Gorell-Barnes, 1994: 946).

Such approaches to supporting parents and families towards better functioning continue to be critical to the success of family support and preservation policies and programmes (De Garmo et al., 2004).

Taylor and Strickland (1986), in a study of family patterns in relation to reading, suggest that families who read pleurably together are at the same time enhancing family dynamics and attachment. They are also improving communication, understandings, and involvement with each other. This is an aspect of family functioning enhancement overlooked in the social work literature, but very important to thinking in education where there is concern about the disadvantages for children from homes where books are not present and enjoyed. The children are disadvantaged compared with peers when starting school and this disadvantage can continue throughout their education. Parent-school partnerships can be helpful to remedy this. The role of reading with children linked to consideration of parenting capacity is therefore perhaps also relevant to social work aimed at supporting family groups and work in parent centres.

Can parenting capacity be enhanced?

Practitioners aim to enhance parenting capacity through educational projects, clinical programmes, and family support interventions. Such work is very alive in current practice, with substantial evaluation and research into the outcomes of projects beginning to build some empirical evidence about what is effective in what circumstances. There is cause for optimism that a variety of approaches might be effective in enabling parents to build their capacity to be more effective for their children.

It appears that where social exclusion, caused by poverty and poor community resources, is the main barrier to effective parenting, the effectiveness of parent support and community

building is most clearly evidenced. Relieving stressors on parents, and providing material and social supports enables them to focus on their parenting (Holman, 1999; Holman et al., 1981). Where parents simply lack skills but are well motivated there is also some evidence that positive parenting skills can be taught to enable them to manage areas such as child misbehaviour, home safety or basic care (Neville et al., 1996). However where inner psychological issues are making it difficult for an individual to parent effectively, the possibility of enhancement is more complex, especially when mental illness, drugs and/or alcohol are involved.

From time to time, this chapter has touched on the societal contexts which support or hinder parenting capacity and strategies to support parents. While the focus remains the interaction between parents and child, it is important to note that the community context for child rearing is extremely significant. Commentators on the Assessment Framework have emphasised the importance of strengthening communities, and giving weight to the critical importance of the third side of the assessment triangle (Jack and Gill, 2003). Parenting in a poor environment is known to increase parental stress and make coping more difficult (Ghate and Hazel, 2002). Therefore while there is a focus on parenting capacity in this study, it also bears in mind the extent to which social contexts and wider environments impact on families.

Summary

This chapter has introduced some of the concepts regarding parenting capacity and incapacity relevant to contemporary contexts. It has considered parenting capacity enhancement strategies, showing that this is a complex and multifaceted area where a range of approaches may be beneficial depending on parents' circumstances. The chapter has identified some of the diverse approaches to enhancing parenting capacity and explored some evaluations of projects.

The discussion of parenting capacity in social work literature is a serious business and it has to be, given the serious nature of the decisions that can be made by courts to separate children from biological parents, and to arrange substitute care through care orders, fostering and adoption. However in the area of early intervention, family support and family reunion, there is scope to offer creative and less stigmatising interventions which build on existing family strengths and are socially inclusive.

This study has been designed, with the enhancement of parenting capacity in mind, to explore how the activity of reading with children might have a role in the family support, other practitioner interventions and building parenting capacity. It therefore examines the extent to which a group of parents can be influenced directly and subliminally by their reading with their children.

The study also considers whether there is room for social workers, as well as other practitioners, to improve their transactions with families through building the pleasure the parent has in relation to the child, which may come from reading and sharing books with children. This may be a less self-conscious or earnest means of enhancement than some of the programmes discussed so far, but it can be argued that it might be a natural, economic, less stigmatising, and relatively easy way to work. Most parents read with their children, and reading books with a child is one of the best and easiest ways of building a relationship between parents and children whatever their situation. This multifaceted topic will therefore be further developed throughout the study, in relation to the parenting capacity domain of the Assessment Framework, and also in relation to meeting children's needs.

The next chapter therefore introduces the topic of children's books, and the benefits of a parent reading with their children, from the perspective of a literature usually associated with education.

Chapter 3

Children's literature and parenting capacity: stories, doors and windows to another dimension

Stories are like doors and windows; you can enter places and leave by them, hide behind them and see through them.

(Hendy, L. (1994), 'From drama to story'. In Styles, Bearne and Watson, *The Prose and the Passion: Children and their Reading*, 106-113)

Introduction

Enchantment is not a functional concept, compared with some of the language of parenting capacity. However as Bettelheim suggests in *The Uses of Enchantment* it has a particular place in the child's emotional development:

When all the child's wishful thinking gets embodied in a good fairy, all his destructive wishes in an evil witch, all his fears in a voracious wolf, all the demands of his conscience in a wise man encountered on an adventure, all his jealous anger in some animal that pecks out the eyes of his archrivals – then the child can finally begin to sort out his contradictory tendencies. Once this starts the child will be less engulfed by unmanageable chaos.

(Bettelheim, 1951: 67)

The development of imagination and creativity in children is an important part of emotional development. The lack of it can impair children's relationships with peers and adults. Literature has a fundamental role in this aspect of children's development. For example, reading allows children the opportunity to deal with some difficult and strong feelings which are a natural part of human psychological growth and development. Stories, especially mythic ones, enable readers to meet fears and anxieties, hopes and

sorrows safely (Meek, 1982; Smith, 1994). Adults (as the popularity of soap operas and books indicates) can find rest and relaxation by immersing themselves in fiction and fantasy:

Stories deal with feelings and conflicts that we have dealt with from infancy onwards: stories about separation and being reunited (romantic stories), stories about love and hate (murder and war stories), stories about discovering and understanding (detective stories and mystery stories). The characters, the plot, and the setting come together to provide themes, with which we are familiar and resolutions for which we hope.

(Jacobs, 1988: 14-15)

This chapter considers the place of reading in children's emotional, intellectual, spiritual, moral and imaginative development, and the parental capacity to foster it. Literature on children's reading is concerned with:

- the importance of reading for child development;
- how adults can enhance children's reading;
- the literary appraisal of books designed for younger readers.

Debates include how children develop reading skills, the value and quality of children's books, and parental involvement. The focus here is developmental issues, and the place of the book and the parent in the child's growth to maturity. The parent may also be affected through the process of reading with children, and their parenting capacity enhanced through shared literary experiences with the child. This is now considered in more detail.

Where texts and children meet

This heading is taken from Bearne and Watson (2000) who explore the way children make meaning from books in and out of school. They view the child as actor and extend the genre of children's literature to include CD-ROM and other audiovisual media.

However, children's literature in print is where the reading experience between parent and child is most focussed. This is articulated by Winnicott in *Playing and Reality* (1971). Winnicott suggests that there is a potential third space between 'inner psychic realities' and 'external world' realities where the interactive 'play' of ideas brings about cognitive and emotional growth and development. Winnicott's conceptualisation of the 'imaginative playing space' has been used in relation to psychotherapy and counselling and has also been adopted by theorists about children's literature (Bearne and Watson, 2000; Meek, 2000: 199; Meek et al., 1977: 102-3).

Such theorists define children's literature as, literature intentionally written for an audience of young readers. They argue that children mainly read for pleasure and emotional effectiveness (May, 1995), and that this guides their book choices. Meek says that children are the best critics of books written with them as the target audience, and are very capable of deciding what they like and do not like. She comments:

My experience suggests that young readers abandon texts that they don't want to read. They cannot be forced to march through what they think is enemy territory.
(Meek, 2000: 209)

Parents, teachers, librarians and authors have some control of the availability of children's literature. Libraries have withdrawn authors from time to time because they have felt certain books convey the wrong attitudes to young minds. There is therefore some censorship, and children are not always entirely free to choose and decide for themselves. There are also debates about the content of children's books, for example, the concern

about the negative portrayal of overweight people in J. K. Rowling's Dursley family (Rowling, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000).

Children, reading and development

Children gain pleasure from reading alone, with adults, and in groups. The place of reading in the child's cognitive and emotional development is a primary preoccupation of educators, who view reading both as a skill and as formative in developing children's understanding and awareness of the world (Jackson, 1993). Further, there is a sense in which, the use of literature promotes wholeness in a child's cognitive and emotional growth. Arnold suggests that children's literature:

Connects – the passion of our inner worlds with the prose of events we are caught up in ... so that lives fragment no longer.

(Arnold, 1994: 55-6)

A child's reading, writing and play fundamentally contribute to their wholeness and sense of well-being:

One strong argument for literature therefore is that it often has the potential to offer a different, far more individual, imaginative experience to the child, in which he or she may sometimes discover important personal meanings unavailable to them elsewhere.

(Tucker, 1981: 230)

The established canon of writing on children and literature provides some key points for discussion in this chapter which are considered next under the headings:

- Literacy is part of children's holistic development.
- Reading needs to be pleasurable.
- Parents and carers are critical to support pleasure and learning.
- There are possibilities of disadvantage and exclusion.
- Family literacy provides some key developmental advantages.
- Literacy is a way children can find a voice.

Literacy is part of children's holistic development.

In a society where literacy is closely allied to children's achievement, being literate is not just about the technical ability to read signs and symbols. For pre-school children the introduction of books, poems and rhymes into their lives develops the:

- ability to listen and distinguish sound;
- ability to look, remember and see what is the same and what is different;
- knowledge and love of words;
- understanding of what books are;
- ability to enjoy quiet times (listening);
- enjoyment of nursery rhymes and sounds;
- ability to use libraries.

(Jeffs, 1984: 15)

Critchley, writing about story and its importance for a child, suggests that it has a role in a range of emotional and cognitive dimensions such as:

- *fostering hope;*
- *facilitating understanding;*
- *aiding communication;*
- *promoting development;*

- *healing wounds.*

Critchley (2003: 84)

This has not gone unnoticed in social work practice with children, of all ages, who have experienced mental health problems or trauma of various kinds. Critchley (2003) also argues that story telling has therapeutic qualities which make it useful to social workers who meet children who have experienced trauma in their lives. She identifies the need for creative communication with children in need and at risk because story telling:

... facilitates participation, engenders optimism, and helps people to regain their own resources and capabilities.

(Critchley, 2003: 84)

Some social workers and other practitioners use books and stories for direct work with children to explain changes of placement, and to help them come to terms with loss and change. A paper on Harry Potter (Seden, 2002a) and the attendant publicity (Matthews, 2002) resulted in some interesting personal and professional responses from social workers on the subject of using stories. For example:

I needed to talk to two children aged 7 and 5 about adoption, and thought that Harry Potter provided a wonderful opportunity. So I talked about how his parents were dead because of 'You know Who', and his aunt and uncle were not kind to him, and then how the Weasley's kind of adopted him, having him home for school holidays. I think the parents were more impressed than the children, but it helped them to see how they could use stories the children already know to talk about big issues in life.

(Jefferies, 2002: personal communication)

Stories help children learn what life is about by using the author's imagination to visit the lives of others in the present, past, or in fantasy worlds (Mackay and Simo, 1976). This process enables a child (or adult) to understand their own experiences and, by entering imaginatively into the lives of others, develop sympathy and empathy. Mackay and Simo conclude that literature is a medium:

... to give a view of the world a mirror to reflect joys, sorrows, problems, struggles, hopes, values, lies, mistakes, and ask questions about reality.

(Mackay and Simo, 1976: 75)

In a modern context this can include some of the perplexities and challenges of life such as understanding cultures, political rights, technology, changing lives, global and local poverty. However young readers want to choose what interests them and not to be overloaded inappropriately with books on issues. Some books about fantasy worlds still engage seriously with key aspects in contemporary culture (Whitely, 2000: 182-3). Some recent children's fiction actively engages with political and painful issues. For example, *The Baby and Fly Pie* (Burgess, 1993) is about children who live on a rubbish tip and *Junk* (Burgess, 1997) is about the use of drugs.

Books tackling social issues, meant for older children, have provoked some controversy (Daniels, 2000). However, it can be argued that writers like Le Guin (1993) or Pullman (1995) usefully engage with the realities of worlds in tension and conflict. It can also be argued that modern writers for younger children should not always shun contemporary realities, or avoid moral and cultural concerns (Bearne and Watson, 2000). Whatever a child reads, there is an opportunity to enlarge their capacity for thinking, conceptualising and feeling. This is further enriched if an interested adult is sharing the experience.

Reading needs to be pleasurable

Darton (1982) produced a comprehensive history of children's literature mapping the growth from fables, godly books, peddlers pack books, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, moral tales and nonsense books to the present vast repertoire, and maintains that books are meant to give children spontaneous pleasure. This may involve being scared occasionally. Enjoyable story telling carries subliminal messages. C.S.Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (2006) have been described as thinly disguised metaphysical arguments (Tucker, 1981). Pullman's work is a vehicle for his own secular perspective, humanism. There is a sense in which, lulled by pleasure, other messages are absorbed. All literature is a powerful medium for influencing thought (Bearne and Watson, 2000; Meek, 2000).

Jeffs (1984) emphasises that reading must never be argued about because what children want in life is love. If reading leads to criticism the child will see this as removal of love. He argues that, if parents enjoy reading with children, their pleasure in the books will rub off on the child. Importantly, much of a child's pleasure in reading comes from the parent's enjoyment and the closeness of reading together. This gives the parent the opportunity both to praise the child for their contribution and to share the harder parts of the book, perhaps reassuring a child through the scary parts, talking with older children about some of the underlying messages, or simply responding to children's thoughts and questions. Therefore educationalists advocate naturalness, children taking the lead and the reading of books that catch the imagination and give pleasure (Reynolds, 1997).

Parents and carers are critical to support pleasure and learning;

There are books for parents showing them how to help children learn to read. Solomon (1990) describes how parents can enhance children's reading and literacy, offering ideas and booklists. The partnership between school and home and child is critical, so that relationships are built between the school, home and learner (Merrtens and Vass, 1990). Books for teachers suggest that parents need guidance on how to approach reading, as

they may draw on their own unhelpful previous educational experiences. Parents often continue to draw on old ideas unless a school, library, or parent centre is active in suggesting new approaches and new books and the philosophy of mutual enjoyment.

Parental support has a big impact on children's success. Therefore, educationalists argue for structured home-school partnerships which include awareness that reading tends to be left to mothers, and that schools need to constantly reassure parents that their contribution is valued. Teachers, it is argued, should take care not to develop negative attitudes to some parents, beware undermining parents and offer support (Topping, 1985, 1986, 2001). However it is important to be aware that teachers may have little training in working with parents, and may not be alert to the social and financial pressures which affect some parents' ability to be involved with school, or the potential difficulty for a parent of disclosing their lack of literacy to their child's school.

Parents who try to influence their child's choice of reading can make it the cause of conflict and pressure, especially if they try to steer the child towards what they consider to be good books. However, it is more important to encourage children to access a wide choice of books and find what they enjoy. The choice available is increasing and most children will find something they like, and probably also enjoy the same book over and over. As Green argues:

The best children's books are infinitely re-readable, the child can come back to them at increasing ages, and even as a grown up, still find new sources of enjoyment. Some books, a few books, need never be grown away from; they can be shared with children and with the child within ... books that succeed in that comprehensive way, that bind the generations together, parents with children, past with present, with future.

(Green, 1990: 70)

C.S. Lewis is reputed to have said that a book that could only be read by children was a poor children's book.

Possibilities for disadvantage and exclusion

Styles and Bearne (2003) discuss the richness of multimedia text now available to young people, offering pictures, visual narratives and sophisticated pictorial text. Responsiveness to such resources requires good opportunities, and it may be that families with fewer resources at home will be disadvantaged, unless electronic media are made accessible in schools and libraries. It is already well established that socio-economic factors affect children's opportunities, and that the gap between the socially included and those marginalised is a serious concern. Although active parental engagement goes some way to mitigating this, there are other more subtle aspects of disadvantage.

Most mothers are not passive, they will have their own views on education for their children. However the mother's or father's own qualifications and educational experiences are important in the construction of relationships between home, school and community, and influence the moral and political stances that parents take (David et al., 1993).

Literature itself sometimes marginalises by carrying societal prejudices and assumptions.

As Hunt writes of children's books:

There can be no question that texts in this area are culturally formative and of massive importance educationally, intellectually and socially. Perhaps more than any other texts they reflect society as it wishes to be, as it wishes to be seen, and as it unconsciously reveals itself to be. Early nineteenth century texts, for example, clearly saw themselves as firm and godly; they may now appear to be repressive and brutal.

(Hunt, 1990: 2)

Newman's (1982) bibliography of children's books, analysing them from a feminist perspective, identifies female stereotypes where girls are seen as passive and dependent. There are also other kinds of stereotype: sweet old lady; beautiful heroine; independent woman. It can be argued that there are stereotypical roles for boys too in children's books, for example, brave little soldier. It can be argued that gypsies (travelling families) often receive a crude, hostile, stereotypical or romanticised treatment. Books for children can be responsible for the continuation of negative attitudes and assumptions about groups of people which sustain the barriers to social inclusion.

It remains difficult for ethnic minority children to find themselves sufficiently represented in books. Children's books have moved on from the excruciating days of *Little Black Sambo*, but there is inherent 'racism' in the writing in many older books. Libraries have often taken a stand on this and have created an awareness of a need for a different literature. There are still few stories showing contemporary ethnic minority families with whom children can identify. Picture books have become more representative. Shirley Hughes, for example, has updated her work to show a more multi-ethnic and multicultural world. The Ahlbergs' picture books are multi-ethnic, for example *The Baby's Catalogue* (1986) and *Starting School* (2001).

There is a growing genre which addresses the issues of under-representation and marginalisation in children's literature. There are some books, such as *So Much* (Cooke and Oxenbury, 1994) and *Grandpa Chatterji* (Gavin, 1993) which show Afro-Caribbean and Asian home life in ordinary and positive ways. There also remains the tendency to stereotype families to Mother, Father and children, but this is changing. Modern writers such as Jacqueline Wilson, Nick Hornby and the Ahlbergs, amongst others, are updating the whole genre of children's fiction. There are also more books available about children's experiences, for example about: separation and divorce, step families, disability, adoption

and other experiences (Bryan, 1998; Cole, 1994, 1995, 1997; Thomas, 1998; Thomas and Harker, 2000).

Family literacy provides some key developmental advantages.

It has been argued that when parents and children read together it brings the family together (Taylor and Strickland, 1986). This study of six families identifies what helps or hinders the development of literacy, considers the way language transmits culture, and suggests that supportive contexts encourage children to become readers. The study shows how parents' own school and childhood experience impacts on what parents do with their own children:

The evolution of literary transmission is highly dependent on the childhood experiences of the parents, and thus the interplay of the individual biographies and educative styles of the parents becomes the dominant factor in shaping the literary experiences of the children within the home.

(Taylor and Strickland, 1986: 12)

At the same time the study asserted that children are not passive:

The children are continually altering patterns of interaction in unconscious and unintended ways but which can modify immature and undeveloped activity ... and succeed in moderating adult organised activities accidentally and surreptitiously, as undoubtedly each child brings a new dimension to the transmission of literacy styles and values within the family.

(Taylor and Strickland, 1986: 92-3)

This connects to Winnicott's 'playing space' between book and reader and parent and child where imaginative ideas are exchanged and transmitted. However the study found

that children from literate environments have enormous advantages when learning to read and write. Living in a home with impoverished levels of literacy is a disadvantage in a literate society. Without positive action there is the possibility of compounding intergenerational disadvantage:

Such experiences (family reading) are beyond the reach of many children and the possibility exists that literacy will only emerge in their lives as a barrier between home and school and also as a contrivance of familial dissent.

(Taylor and Strickland, 1986: 87)

Relevant literacy programmes are necessary, because the consequences for the children of parents with minimal literacy skills can be substantial. This study established an empirical base line for the consideration of the enhancement of literacy through family reading which has met little challenge, although research into family literacy and the efficacy of family literacy programmes continues to identify both the significance and the complexities of children's experiences (Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003). This will be explored further in Chapter 10.

Literacy is a way children can find a voice.

Smith (1994) says children's own written and published stories give them a voice, especially when opportunities to dictate and tape record for transcription are offered. Hopefully, as children are viewed as actors, with ideas and agency about their own lives, they will be offered creative writing, poetry and artistic opportunities. While writing is 'only a story isn't it?' (Leeson, 1994: 143, 147) the writer has a role in 'influencing, arousing and challenging outlooks not just to entertain' so children can find their creativity and also communicate need in this way.

This is different from using literature to shape children, and contrasts with the serious moral purpose of Victorian children's literature, for example the enduring classic, *The Water Babies* with Mrs. 'Do as you would be done by' and Mrs. 'Be done by as you did' (Kingsley, 1995). Stories for children have often been written for ideological reasons: to frighten them into being good, to show awful things that befall the naughty, or to explain more complex ideas current in society. Most nefarious was Hitler's use of children's picture books to take anti-Semitic propaganda into German schools. While not everyone believes what they read, a major task for parents and educators is to teach children to be critical, in the best sense, not simply to censor what they read, or focus on technical competence. As society develops, no one can be exactly sure of literature's precise influence, but the interaction of the conscious and unconscious mind and critical awareness in the reader remains most important.

Bearne and Watson (2000: 181) argue that the transmission of moral and cultural values is not necessarily top down. While accepting that children's literature can both instruct and delight, it is argued that readers work out their own views through engaging with the ambiguities of morality. Stories, especially familiar ones, change according to who is telling the tale, and therefore provide material for debate, and help children to 'grapple with their own rights and responsibilities' (Bearne and Watson, 2000: 187). Children can engage with moral choices in a safe environment which can be a kind of rehearsal for life.

Meek (2000) takes this further and asserts that where child and text meet, children learn in all kinds of complex ways, which make the texts sites of transformation. If this is so, then there are implications for adults who read with the children who, through text, are finding their own voice, or at least working out what it is. Paton Walsh, a children's author, suggests that writers can be:

... helping young readers understand the culture into which they were born, helping them construct a benign and enabling personal story, helping them to connect the public and the inner world ...

(Paton Walsh, 1994: 219)

Children's writers can be collaborators with children, helping them to understand and articulate a view of the world. As Margaret Meek (1982, 1997, 2000) and Applebee (1985), critical theorists on children and literature, have suggested, we go to books to find ourselves and consider our own lives through engaging in a story:

One of the important aspects of being a reader is that it enables us to engage safely, and yet courageously with fears, anxieties, hopes and sadness, life and death, through stories and particularly mythic stories.

(Meek, 1982: 137)

Critical theory about children and their reading suggests that they are competent to evaluate and make decisions in relation to what they read. They are actors and have a voice about reading as much as in any other decision about their lives. Daniels (2000) argues that, making decisions is inherent in the process of reading, so even very young children are selective in making their own responses. This response and the ability to be critical can be enhanced through talking with others. Ways of understanding the messages in children's books is a preoccupation of critical work on children's literature.

The discussion of these six key points has shown how reading is an important component of children's development, and that parents need the capacity to engage with them in shared reading, discussion and debate. This is an important part of the parent's capacity to provide emotional closeness, stimulation, and stability for a child. However, there is also a sense in which children's cognitive and moral understanding can also be enhanced

through literature and emotions and feelings be better understood. This chapter therefore now considers how critics of children's literature have understood the developmental meanings that can exist in 'the enchantment' which is story, myth and metaphor, and which parents can share with children to mutual benefit.

The making of meanings

Psychodynamic interpreters of children's literature, in particular fairy stories, have been very influential (Bettleheim, 1951; Rustin and Rustin, 2001, 2002). The psychodynamic developmental approach is prioritised here, but other approaches to children's literature can be taken. For example, Hunt (1990) published an overview of children's books which identified resource lists for parents and professionals. He also clarified the elements defining the study of children's literature and suggested (1990: 4) that there are many 'pragmatic assessments' and that this is probably what parents and children themselves do, choosing to read what they come across, what is offered, what they remember and what gives them pleasure. Hunt also identified that the study of children's literature is interdisciplinary:

Developmental psychology jostles politics and censorship: stylistics and readability go hand in hand with educational strategy; illustration and mixed media studies have to sit with practical librarianship, reception theory faces the practicalities of response. The historical-bibliographic approach may seem to be the odd person out in this matrix, but writers in that area have been more aware of the social context of their work than any other.

(Hunt, 1990: 4)

A developmental approach, using psychology to understand texts written for children, is an influential strand of theorising about children's literature. It is congruent with some social work approaches to child development and parenting capacity. It derives from a

shared theory base, developed from the work of Freud, Jung, Winnicott and other child development theorists such as Piaget (1932). Developmental psychology influences the work of critics such as Applebee (1985) and Meek (1982, 1997, 2000). Those who study children's literature make links between inner psychological worlds and external realities. This approach is best articulated by Tucker (1981, 2000) who started his career as an educational psychologist before becoming one of the best known commentators and academics writing on children's books. The next section draws extensively from Tucker alongside some other key theorists.

Children's developmental needs and children's literature

Tucker (1981) studied the psychological appeal of a range of children's literature, utilising developmental psychology, to understand the uses children make of books. Drawing from Freud and Piaget, he examined the way children's emotions, imagination and intellect may be stimulated to new possibilities by books. There are two parts to his analysis: psychoanalytic theory to consider how 'fiction allows for the expression of unconscious fantasy and so acts as a safety valve' and Piaget's cognitive theory to see how books might help children to 'make sense of things' (Tucker, 1981: 4). This linking of developmental theorising with the analysis of fiction is important for the arguments in this thesis.

Bettleheim, and others of a psychodynamic persuasion theorise, as did Freud, that the recognition of possible personal meanings can occur at an unconscious level in certain powerful stories. They suggest the possibility that many stories contain archetypal themes and symbols from an oral tradition and a collective unconscious (Jung, 1933). The impact of story on the child's moral capacity (Kohlberg, 1981) is also relevant, and so is the impact of social contexts. For example there is 'the culture of poverty when life is seen as about luck because of economic disadvantage' (Tucker, 1981: 5).

This study is concerned with parents and children (0-12) who, according to Piaget and Kohlberg, have a moral imagination but remain fairly concrete thinkers. Tucker suggests they like big themes such as heroism and the triumph of the weak. A Freudian analysis would also emphasise the power of inner fantasies and drives in enjoying this. There may be no simple divide between children's and adults' tastes. It can be argued that adults also like big themes such as heroism and the triumph of the weak, especially when it comes to movies. Stories like *Batman* and *Dr Who* work on two levels and partially parody the notion of the superhero. There are also serious superhero productions such as *Star Wars*. Children especially may need compensation through books for their struggles with their own lack of omnipotence (Crago, 1990).

The next section discusses the needs of children aged 0-12 using an age based grouping common to child development theory. However division based on chronological age is always artificial. In reality the boundaries used will be crossed and recrossed as children either develop or regress (Aldgate et al., 2006; Tucker, 1981). In particular it is important to note that some children are now pre-teens from the age of nine, and are likely to start dipping into books aimed at the traditional thirteen plus and adult markets. Equally many a teenager has been known to enjoy books aimed at younger children, if surreptitiously.

Ages 0-3

Whatever picture books a child gets, however, the intimate experience of sharing them with a parent is probably the most basically satisfying of the lot. From this secure vantage point, children can look at pictures that have the advantage of slowing down normal experience, so that the child can take an isolated image on a page and then absorb or discuss it at leisure.

(Tucker, 1981: 28)

Reading with a parent is special for children because of the intimacy that is experienced with the person caring for them. At the same time they can interact with the parent and learn both what the picture means objectively and also concepts associated with it, such as 'safe' or 'dangerous'. They therefore:

... build familiarity with the outside world in a safe, predictable way which foreshadows some of the greater things to come from books in the future.

(Tucker, 1981: 29)

Nursery rhymes

These are a very important genre for babies and play an important part in language development. Enjoying the sound and rhythm of language, and interacting with parents, all happens in the context of a relationship. Therefore, 'simple songs and rhymes help to sustain this first important relationship through shared pleasure in language, games and other popular routines' (Tucker, 1981: 30). This is very natural and very satisfying for adult and child. At this stage content is less important than rhythm, although the way words of similar meaning are juxtaposed, numbers given and words repeated, develops language skills.

Nursery rhymes mimic the adult world, sometimes in bizarre and anarchic ways. They often have a pervasive violence and include much about sexuality and death. This may act as some kind of safety valve, externalising anxiety and rehearsing at a distance some puzzling aspects of life. This may be lost on parents, who often pass on rhymes that have been told to them, oblivious to the meanings found by critical commentators in nursery rhymes and playground rhymes (Opie and Opie, 1959). However, it may be the case that the onomatopoeic words and rhythms convey the sense of evil, danger or pleasure.

Nursery rhymes sometimes have a narrative structure and can be humorous. *Jack and Jill* illustrates much of the above:

Jack and Jill

Went up the hill

To fetch a pail of water

Jack fell down

And broke his crown

Jill came tumbling after.

Rhymes exercise the child's curiosity and stimulate intellectual development by being familiar, risky and unpredictable all at once. Safety is through the presence and interaction with the parent. Tucker (1981: 45) suggests that such rhymes survive because children continue to respond to them alongside TV jingles and other modern equivalents. A modern playground rhyme that some small and older children like shows a more consumerised, and perhaps less dangerous or meaningful, view of life:

Pizza Hut, Pizza Hut,

Kentucky Fried Chicken and a Pizza Hut,

MacDonald's, MacDonald's ...

Ages 3-7

Children of this age understand more about the world and are interested in everyday topics (for example, shops, trains, postboxes) and also worlds outside their experience (for example, ships, space, fairies). There is significant use of animals as characters. Some much loved books across the generations are the *Tales of Peter Rabbit* (Potter, 2006) and *Winnie the Pooh* (Milne, 1997). Through such books children can identify with the pseudo child who takes risks and runs into danger and trouble such as Benjamin Bunny, or enjoy identifying with a powerful child such as Christopher Robin.

Successful books in this genre are those where the balance between text and pictures is aligned. The picture book world:

... has a wealth of experience to offer children and there will always be the possibility of finding out something more about colour, form, texture and movement.

(Tucker, 1981: 32)

Children can talk about the emotions of people in stories which they could not do in the abstract. They can interpret them with some degree of independence if the text and pictures are not too contradictory:

When much in a young child's life seems distant and puzzling, picture books which can both slow down and simplify experience by presenting it in static, often more readily comprehensible terms – may be quite literally, just the sort of thing a very young audience is looking for.

(Tucker, 1981: 34)

Picture books offer child and parent much to observe and interpret together (Bearne and Watson, 2000). There are many, known as situation books, written specifically to interpret experiences to children, for example the *Spot* series (Hill, 1984, 1989). Books like *Spot Goes to School* and *Spot's Baby Sister* are useful to prepare children for life changes. While they cannot explain everything, they provide a medium for parent and child to explore, safely together, emotional, new and perhaps scary experiences. Children of this age also like order, and books can help them to feel in control through the routine ordering of objects. For example, *Each Peach, Pear Plum* (Ahlberg and Ahlberg, 1999) is not just about number skills: the ritual telling can dispel anxiety and uncertainty.

Tucker (1981: 55) suggests that, beyond the blandness of some books, children may need other literature which has more 'bite' and recognises the 'less socialised and more aggressive sides of childhood'. For example, there are books that deal with children's feelings about brothers and sisters. *My Naughty Littler Sister* (Edwards, 2002) remains very popular and is mentioned by one of the participants in this research as much loved by her and her sisters.

A calming and very popular book is *Can't you Sleep Little Bear* (Waddell and Firth, 1988), reprinted some twenty times up to the 2000 edition. This story shows an adult carer and a baby bear (Big Bear and Little Bear). It reassures children about the dark, showing how parents to can handle fear. It ends:

DARK!

'Ooooh! I'm scared' said Little Bear

cuddling up to Big Bear.

Big Bear lifted Little Bear and

cuddled him, and said, 'Look at the dark,

Little Bear'. And Little Bear looked.

This illustrates the power of parents to reassure, and to calm a child's fears. The device of animals and a story about woods and caves, all nicely illustrated, approaches a primeval childhood fear of the dark obliquely, and illustrates the heart of good parenting, the ability to convey love and security through relationship, and to mediate the scary bits of life.

Stop Picking on Me (Thomas and Harker, 2000) also tackles something worrying. It is a story about bullies, with questions for adults to ask children as they read. This is a more direct way to deal with children's issues. From the late 1990s books have been emerging that provide factual real life dialogue about real experiences. It is possible that some of

these books are too direct, and feel stigmatising to the children and parents who might be offered them in contrast to the indirect approach of *Can't You Sleep Little Bear* (Waddell and Firth, 1988) and *Spot* (Hill, 1984, 1989) which are runaway successes. It is difficult to know, however, as some of these topic based books are not so well known.

Tucker argues (1981) that children enjoy books that subvert authority, ridicule parents and allow them to experiment with danger, violent and exciting fantasies as in *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1967). *Not Now Bernard* (McKee, 1990) shows parents who refuse to believe there is a monster in the house, dismissing the son repeatedly, saying 'Not Now Bernard'. At one level, it delights children that the parents are wrong and the monster takes the child's place in the home. A psychodynamic understanding suggests that the monster is the child's own dangerous wishes and fears projected on to the monster. This book also allows parents to handle, subliminally, the fear that their child is a monster. At another level the parents fail to see that their child changes into a monster because they are too busy to listen to him or notice. The book operates at a wealth of levels which are psychologically satisfying and humorous. Tucker writes:

Anti-authority themes in literature therefore may reflect small children's occasional anger at continually being controlled and manipulated by those bigger than themselves, just as more positive feelings towards authority may be represented by idealised parent figures.

(Tucker, 1981: 55)

Thomas the Tank Engine (Awdry, 2005) offers endless transactions between bigger and smaller, good and naughty, cautious and adventurous, engines which operate as a sibling group kept more or less in order by a parental or authority figure in the shape of the stationmaster. The engines' world resembles a boys' school with a kindly but firm

headmaster. Feminist critics would comment on the fact the only female characters are trucks pulled along by engines!

Animals in children's books are thinly disguised parents and children. Tucker (1981) suggests that these animals have the advantage of not being tied to time and space. They can be metaphorical or symbolic representations of parent, child and other social relationships. It has been argued that they transcend culture, although the rather stereotypical cultures of the animal families militate against this. However, it has been argued that class and race issues have been injected self-consciously into children's books and that more a subtle approach is preferable, for example:

In The Borrowers, Mary Norton in one fantastic stroke ... invented a way of presenting the experience of being small and propertyless in a society in which that entails constant vulnerability.

(Hughes, 2001: 85)

The majority of books for small children use the mechanism of families of bears, ducks, elephants and a range of other animals to represent caring parents with cute offspring. One of the research participants who described herself as an Asian Hindu wryly remarked that, in the absence of stories where her dual heritage child could fully identify, she found it more creative to share stories about elephant families – Indian of course! When more dangerous animals appear in children's books they often represent strong and difficult individual feelings. In the case of *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* (Kerr, 1992, 2000), the Tiger represents the intrusion of dangers from the outside world, perhaps undesirable friends or more wild and dangerous threats, which can usually be tamed by suitable parental domesticity.

Tucker's analysis of Beatrix Potter's canon of work shows how a cosy set of picture books can also handle fears of external danger, inner feelings of destructiveness, fantasies of independence, danger and near escape, getting into trouble, the consequences of being caught and the fun of getting out of trouble undetected. There is also the lurking danger of adults who might dislike and even murder children. Potter handles the most difficult themes by having Peter Rabbit illustrated as more like animal and less like child:

Perhaps it would have been too frightening to show a humanised rabbit just about to have its back broken by Mr McGregor's enormous nailed boot ... and at that stage readers may feel relieved to see Peter looking like a rabbit again.

(Tucker, 1981: 63)

Children can meet and avoid guilt and aggressive feelings through vicarious but safe identification, a rabbit may in reality end up in the stewing pot a child will not. The most skilled exponents of this genre remain popular with generation on generation and across races and cultures. Another form of literature, akin to nursery rhymes, that has carried universal strong fears and archetypal concerns for 3-7 year olds is the fairy story or folk tale.

Fairy stories and folk tales

The capacity of fairy stories and folk tales to carry psychological themes and life course issues has ensured their survival. *In Hansel and Gretel* the children very nearly do end in the cooking pot but escape by tricking the witch, a favourite theme of children's stories being the triumph of the young over older people. Who really doubts that Hansel will not outwit father, stepmother, and witch? Even nature is on the children's side in some versions of the story, where the birds and forest creatures help. Sadly Gretel is not accorded the same powers as Hansel. There are many interpretations of Hansel and Gretel. One perspective is that *Hansel and Gretel* portrays:

A rationalization of the abusive treatment of defenceless children who forgive their father (not their mother) for his abandonment.

(Zipes, 2001: 172)

Tucker (2000) argues that if fairy tale step-mothers are wicked it is paradoxically better for real step-mothers, because the child can discharge any negative feeling in books. He says it might be more of a challenge to real step-mothers if those in books were 'paragons of sweetness and light'. So according to Tucker (2000: 50), it is perhaps helpful that real step-mothers have no competition from positive role models in fairy tales.

Branford (1997, 1998) writes postmodern fairy tales, including a version of Hansel and Gretel where ants and bears gobble up the bread used by the children to find a way back through the forest in the traditional version. Zipes argues against too much Freudian interpretation of fairy tales but still concedes that fairy tales offer:

A vision of how the young must negotiate their place in the world ... Grimm's fairy tales still reveal what the value of fairy tales may be for young readers and viewers who continue to need creative alternatives to the complex demands and constrictions that they encounter in their daily lives.

(Zipes, 2001: 97)

He suggests that tales from Grimm are anti-commodity stories and that, although blamed for contributing to the acceptability of Nazism in Germany because of the nasty and cruel events depicted, they remain an oral tradition which contained for generations the 'precious gems that held the mysteries of life'. As such therefore, he argues, post modern fairy tales (Bacchilega, 1997) explore new and often less gendered possibilities, to draw new meaning from old tales and generate unexploited and forgotten possibilities.

Freudian and Jungian interpretations of folklore and fairy stories suggest that the themes are universal, and relate to birth, death, sexuality, the beginning and endings of the journey of life and the challenges to be overcome along the way. This is probably best summarised by Tucker who writes, after a discussion of cultural diversity in folklore, that:

There are also other compensatory fantasies in fairy stories that seem to be more or less universal. Cinderella, for example is the classic story of the sudden reversal of fortune, and one Victorian scholar collected 345 variations of this basic plot throughout the world. The attraction of such plots has been described by John Buchan as the appeal of, 'The survival of the unfittest, the victory against the odds of the unlikeliest people' with ubiquity which reflects the incurable optimism of human nature.

(Tucker, 2000: 93)

The psychological analysis of folk tales undertaken by Freud, Jung and others identifies within them psychological ideas (for example, infantile fears of omnipotence, the oedipal conflict) and there is similar analysis of newer books (Bearne and Watson, 2000). Rustin and Rustin (2001) argue that the recurrent theme of children's literature is the experience of separation, loss and reunion. This has emotional resonance with children's own experiences and enables them to explore emotions and develop resilience vicariously.

Zipes (2000) identifies a denial of fearsome events in fairy stories because they end happily every time, despite the risks and dangers. There are leaps of improbability, as in Cinderella, who expects happiness in marriage with a prince who only recognises her by the size of her slipper, although symbolically this may be her virginity. Feminist and postmodern versions are infinitely more street wise. Conversely, fairy stories are full of horrors that are worse than real life, hence the concern that Grimm's fairy tales fed the brutality inherent in Nazism. There is a large element of psychological discharge of violent

feeling, together with compensatory mechanisms and permission to indulge the forbidden through fantasy. If you are under a spell, arguably nothing is anyone's fault or responsibility. Bad feelings can be enjoyed and disapproved of at the same time. Sexual curiosity can be safely enjoyed in symbolic and subliminal form.

Bettleheim's view that the reader or hearer beholds what he or she chooses, consciously or unconsciously, remains influential. The strength of the metaphors and the archetypes contained in these stories inevitably reflect back something hitherto undiscovered about the self or the human condition. Emotional satisfaction has ensured their continuance and redevelopment. Bettleheim suggests they are a 'magic' not a 'true' mirror and what is brought of the self is as important as that which is discovered in the story:

Each fairy tale is a magic mirror, which reflects some aspects of our inner world and of the steps required by our evolution from immaturity to maturity ... For those who immerse themselves in what the fairy tale has to communicate, it becomes a quiet deep pool, which at first seems to reflect our own image, but behind it we soon discover the inner turmoil of our soul its depth, and ways to gain peace with ourselves and with the world, which is the reward of our struggles.

(Bettleheim, 1991: 309)

The late twentieth and the twenty-first century have their own stories of those who, like the unlikely hero of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, save the world from evil (Superman, Harry Potter, The Captain of the Star Ship Enterprise, Dr. Who, Zena Warrior Princess). Tucker (1981: 91) argues that the link between human developmental issues and fairy stories is 'the only type of explanation which has gone anywhere near accounting for the world wide popularity of fairy tales'. While psychoanalytic interpretations are varied, fairy tales ostensibly for entertaining young children, contain other messages:

Fairy tales, more than any other, provide the child with the knowledge that he (or she!) is born into a world of death, violence, wounds, adventure, heroism and cowardice, good and evil ... it may also start preparing them for those more violent aspects of adult society which they will also notice for example by watching television news bulletins.

(Tucker, 1991: 95)

Ages 7-11.

In books for children aged 7-11 parents are often absent. Tucker (1981) suggests a developmental explanation. As children move from the magical thinking of early years to middle childhood, they take pleasure in predictable, safe story lines with happy and moral endings, especially stories where children are independent and competent in the peer group. This seems consistent with the lives of children of that age, at least in UK cultures, where becoming socialised, attending school and interaction with peers become the major developmental events. Thus popular fiction deals with children's adventures on their own, in an imaginary land parallel with the real one, for example C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, or the children have adventures which are in the real world, but in a special and secret place as in *Swallows and Amazons* (Ransome, 2001).

This explains the success of Enid Blyton's *Secret 7* and *Famous 5* (Blyton, 2002, 2004) written for an age group who like stories with heroic children who outwit adults. Other examples are *Just William* (Crompton, 2006) or Toad in *Wind in the Willows* (Graeme, 1994), who is really a child who subverts authority. Such characters can always be 'brought back into line after they have had their fling', (Tucker, 1981: 103) and satisfy the emotional need for stability and order. It seems a small step to argue from this that those adults who enjoy sharing such books with children are also enjoying these aspects and vicariously satisfying the needs of their own inner child.

The hold of Enid Blyton on children in this age group needs explanation. Tucker's view is that the attraction is the formula: nice but absent parents, sound morals, children having their own way, some strong (for the time of writing) girl characters, lots of peer group activity of a non-sexual kind. The children are experiencing independence while much remains stereotypical and confirmatory. He argues that Enid Blyton (along with authors of school stories):

Creates an encapsulated world for young readers that simply dissolves with age, leaving behind only memories of excitement and strong identification.

(Tucker, 1981: 106)

In 2006, this world may seem stereotypical and to hark back to a different historical period for middle class families in 1950s Britain. However even then the Blyton world was far from the every day realities of most children. There also appears to be a total insensitivity to real world issues and Tucker comments mischievously:

Children from another Blyton gang also have a habit of doing everything for themselves. In this case the Secret Seven, a group sensitively abbreviated by Miss Blyton to the initials SS, and whose first adventures appeared only four years after the end of the second world war.

(Tucker, 1981: 108)

Jungians would interpret the shadow side of Blyton's work as appealing to parts of ourselves hidden from others. Freudians would analyse the child within Miss Blyton. Tucker attributes her dominance in children's fiction to the fantasy of children as super competent in an age group where the developmental issues are mastery and competence. In the light of current psychological understandings this can be extended to resilience. It

is reassuring for children to read about these small gangs of peers who do things successfully without adult help:

Literature at any age can always both confirm immature patterns of thought and feeling and also suggest that these patterns may not be sufficient in themselves. Young readers faced by this choice, often choose stories that more or less confirm them in what they think or feel, but there is always the possibility that more subtle forms of writing will be read or listened to.

(Tucker, 1981: 131)

The theme of the incompetent adult and triumphant child permeates fictional writing for children of this age. Tucker comments rather wryly that Richmal Crompton's *William* is something of a 'revolutionary' and that:

Mr Brown, William's father, is only one of a long line of fathers or father figures in children's literature who are regularly cut down in their pride.

(Tucker, 1981: 131)

Rowling (1999) treats Mr Weasley and Mr Dursley (two father figures) similarly in her *Harry Potter* stories. Children thus deal with their grudges about parental figures safely. Harry Potter is another special child who saves the day for the adults, some of whom are more deserving than others. This is a leitmotif in the stories children enjoy and can be seen in the *Northern Lights Trilogy* (Pullman, 1995) featuring another special child, Lyra. Jungians would go further and say that the wish for a special child who will save the world (as in the Christian and other religious narratives) is an archetype of the collective unconscious which continues to permeate artistic forms which carry humankind's universal hopes, fears and dreams.

From seven to eleven and onwards, children understand more subtle and complex ways of thinking. While young readers still enjoy myth, they also understand harsher realities in some of the stories about children facing disadvantages. In *The Railway Children* (Nesbitt, 1995) the father is in prison. Bawden (1993, 1997) writes stories where there are not always completely happy endings. Clear cut stories may be chosen by young readers because they explain the puzzling, and help them understand the world and reasons for others people's behaviour. Books for younger teenagers increasingly grapple with issues in modern society. Wilson has a heroine in *The Story of Tracy Beaker* (1998), living in a children's home, and a mother and child grappling with the mother's manic depression (bipolar disorder) in *The Illustrated Mum* (1999).

Children may extend their literacy to other genres such as video and multimedia, but books in printed form are more often read and discussed by parents and children together. Books are associated with closeness and intimacy of relationship. However Zipes (2001: 22) criticises modern children's fiction for the 'commodification of childhood'. He is 'looking for childhoods rich in adventure and opportunities for self exploration and self determination.' In modern children's fiction he finds standardisation and the 'commodification of childhood' together with 'cultural homogenization'.

The conditions under which literature for the young is produced and received have been transformed through institutional changes of education, shifts in family relations, the rise of corporate conglomerates controlling the mass media and market demands.

(Zipes, 2001: 22)

He illustrates this through an analysis of J. K. Rowling's work, arguing that the 'phenomenon of Harry Potter' is both 'formulaic and sexist' and (2001: 172) meeting the

required stereotypes for the phenomenon of 'hit author' marketed to children. Her personal story is (my summary of Zipes):

- rags to riches;
- rejection of the novel by the first publishers who saw it;
- a hero who is a 'magical nerd and post modern whizz kid';
- a book that has sparked moral panic about religion;
- books that are packaged, cute and ordinary and formulaic.

Each book has: a 'prison scene, a noble calling, heroic adventures and a return home' (Zipes, 2001: 177). This is a conventional fairy tale formula with other familiar features: magic, a modest hero, a mission, strange creatures, and sages who are met along the way. There are modern elements, but the whole is stereotypical and sexist as usually the 'girls are left gawking at Harry's prowess!' (2001:185). Zipes attributes J. K. Rowling's success to stereotypical elements and successful marketing. He queries whether many children read them and suggests that the audience may be only 'affluent white parents and their offspring' (2001: 186). He, very reasonably, argues that authors such as Ursula Le Guin, Rosemary Sutcliffe, Joan Aiken and William Mayne receive less publicity despite the quality of their work. He concludes that: Harry Potter is a 'phenomenon' but 'lacks quality' (Zipes, 2001: 188) although the books:

Certainly help children become functionally literate, for they are part of the eternal return to the same and, at the same time, part of the success by which we homogenize our children. Making children all alike is sadly a phenomenon of our time.

(Zipes, 2001: 188)

His argument, that a medium which is about shared page turning could avoid the banalities of TV, movies and other media sold to children, makes the point that mass marketing is often unthinking about quality, while it is increasingly shaping what people read. The role of public libraries, schools, and family centres in bringing a wider range of books to children's and parents' attention is therefore particularly significant. Marginalised groups remain neglected in children's literature and the writing about it, despite the fact that as Zipes suggests (2001: 58):

A child can learn to read and appreciate critically any text, so long as a teacher or parent is patient in guiding the child and also learns to read and see what children are actually reading and confronting.

He concludes rather pessimistically (2001: 58) that:

Unless children and adults become critically aware of how all reading matter is part of the institution of children's literature that functions within the larger culture industry, reading and enjoying literature will be nothing more than acts of consumerism for the sake of consumption.

In analysing the success of *Harry Potter*, others have argued that the popularity with children and their parents is not just about mass marketing and the use of stereotypical forms, but also about the resonance with some social and psychological issues for parents and children. Rowling has perhaps hit a nerve by providing a satisfactory modern fairy tale (Seden, 2000). For, as Jacobs comments:

Present circumstances are often best understood in the light of past experience; and stories, which may combine certain unconscious fictions with facts, provide one of the major routes to linking past with present ... stories are more than

stories and certainly more than a means of discharging feelings. Like dreams and day dreams, they are attempts to order feelings and experience and to set them past at rest to create a sense of belonging, to provide a set of meanings, or to view the present in new and affirming ways.

(Jacobs, 1988: 14-16)

This section has highlighted the links between developmental psychology and children's literature. The next section shows how developmental psychology equally influences social work with vulnerable children and their families and the study of children's literature.

Overlapping and linking theory bases

The study of good enough parenting draws from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, social policy, education and others. Social work has always taken knowledge from these disciplines to frame its own perspectives on parenting, to enable social care professionals to support parents to bring up their children well and to intervene when parents are struggling (Seden, 2002a). Social scientists and psychologists can both draw on literature:

Social scientists, perhaps looking for rigour in their studies, have sometimes made less use of literature than psychotherapists, but some writers link the two disciplines. For example Wilson and Ridler (1989 p.112) suggest, 'the use of literature and to a lesser extent the arts by social scientists to further their understanding of human activity has an honourable if somewhat fluctuating tradition. Freud is supposed to have said of Dostoyevsky that he knew more about psychology than the whole international psycho-analytical society put together'.

(Seden, 2002a: 303)

There is a synergy between what the social sciences have discovered about good enough parenting, and the insights that can be gathered from entering the imaginative world of literature. Importantly, fictional experiences can create empathy in the reader and enable them to confront the need for imagination as parents and practitioners. A deficit in empathic awareness may mean that practitioners fail to see what they might about a child's situation, as inquiries into the deaths of children who tragically weren't safeguarded indicate (Cm5730, 2004; Corby, 2000; Department of Health, 1991; Department for Education and Skills, 2002). It can also be argued that without children's books to read with children, parental opportunities for the development of empathic parenting capacity are diminished.

Empathy, that ability to see into the child's world, is an essential capacity for adults ... and yet can be missing from parental and practitioner actions towards children. Reading and listening to stories, perhaps internalising the insights of children's authors, is a way of entering into the world of another, learning about different situations, how it feels to be someone else and sharpening the capacity for empathy. If this is combined with psychosocial knowledge this can build a more holistic and empathic understanding of children and their world.

(Seden, 2002a: 305)

Summary

This chapter has shown how educators draw from developmental theorising about the benefits for children and parents who read together, and explored how critical commentators on children's literature identify the psychological usefulness of books for children's development. These strands of thinking have their origins in the same developmental psychology which underpins much social work literature about children's needs and parenting capacity. In multi-disciplinary teams and inter-agency contexts educators, parents, social workers and other child care practitioners can draw from this

knowledge together. What is known about the value of reading and talking about books can give parents and practitioners another way of knowing and communicating about children's emotional and cognitive concerns which is ordinary, human and pleasurable.

Parents and children can interpret books together. Stories often deal with topics that parents may want to talk about with their children but have difficulty in raising directly. Strong emotions and fears can be confronted vicariously through books. The theme of separation and loss is identified as prominent in children's literature by Rustin and Rustin (2001). Such books can deal with the fears of many children and the realities of others. Those who work with children experiencing loss could make good use of such books to discuss experiences. This is relevant to the needs of looked after children and others who are separated from their parents or making a change or transition.

Further, it is possible that enhancing parents' reading capacity with their children also enhances their capacity to parent sensitively and with empathy, as well as increasing and widening their joint world view. This has implications for practitioners' roles and their understanding when undertaking assessments and interventions in families' lives.

The next chapter introduces the research methodology used to explore further the nature of the connections between parenting capacity and the ordinary activity of parents and children reading together.

Chapter 4

Methodology

As researchers we have to devise for ourselves a research process that serves our purpose best, one that helps us more than any other to answer our research question ... rather than selecting established paradigms to follow. We are using established paradigms to delineate and illustrate our own.

(Crotty, 1998, *The Foundations of Social Research*: 216)

Introduction

This research study examines some interrelated questions. There was no off the shelf pattern to follow and therefore some time was spent exploring which research methods suited the questions posed. The aim was to establish coherent sets of authentic data sufficient to illuminate the research questions. At the same time, the data had to be presented in a form which allowed the validity of the discussion and findings to be appraised by others. This chapter outlines this process.

Background and guiding ideas.

The research questions are:

1. How are the measures of parenting capacity in the Assessment Framework viewed by parents?
2. Does this match with their current concerns?
3. How important to parents is the capacity to share books with a child?
4. What does this contribute to the capacity to parent?
5. What is the importance of this new dimension for social workers and other professionals in their practice?
6. How could this dimension inform social work practice with vulnerable children and their families in contemporary policy contexts?

Framework for the research

I have therefore:

- Taken a purposive sample that provides data from two diverse groups of parents.
- Interviewed the parents once, using a research instrument with 4 sections, Parts A, B, C and D.
- Used open questions in Parts B and C to carry out semi-structured interviews.
- Used closed questions in Parts A and D to ascertain the demographic characteristics of the samples and surveyed the parents' perspectives on the Assessment Framework. This is referred to as the baseline survey.
- Used illustrations of parenting from the work of the children's author Shirley Hughes in Part C to stimulate discussion on parenting capacity.

Service user views are central to any work undertaken with children and their families in partnership to achieve common goals. Therefore the research set out to consider the twin themes of parenting capacity and reading to children through the views of adults who were, at the time of the research, caring for at least one child between the ages of 0 and 12. It seemed fitting to use a method that relied on self report, both because it is congruent with social work process, and also because it is a useful way of handling perceptions. The research questions were chosen to explore the potential for connections between parenting capacity, the dimensions articulated in the Assessment Framework and reading with children, as outlined in Chapters 1-3.

The complexity of examining a set of relationships (parental capacity as defined in the Assessment Framework, the parents' views on good parenting, and the parents' experiences of reading with their children) rather than single phenomenon meant that a qualitative approach was most capable of handling a consideration of the interaction between two literatures and the different parents' perspectives. This

approach follows Finch (1989, 1991), who has argued that qualitative research remains the ideal vehicle for demonstrating the effects on people's lives of social policies and practices.

The study is following an established route taken in research into the impact of policies on children and their families, in recent years (Cleaver and Freeman, 1995; Department of Health, 1995, 2001; Prior et al., 1999). Trinder (1996) argues that social work research is a political, non neutral activity, where there are linkages between research methodology, social work and wider social and political changes. This research also has to be understood in the social and policy contexts for children's services, and the realities of social inclusion and exclusion in parents' lives.

A quantitative approach (Part A of the research instrument, the baseline survey) was taken to establish whether all the parents interviewed found the Assessment Framework parenting capacity dimensions relevant. Combined or mixed method is often used in social research (Alston and Bowles, 1998; Brannen, 1992; Brown et al., 2003; Gomm and Davies, 2000; Gomm et al., 2000). The study uses the baseline survey and the demographic data as contextual material, but pursues the research questions primarily through open questions and discussion. In such research semi structured questionnaires, followed by interpretive, thematic discussion of the data gathered within specific legal, and or, policy frameworks , in this case the Assessment Framework is used (Hardiker and Barker, 1994, 1996). This methodology, replicates that used in a small scale study (Seden, 1999, 2001b). The design is described next.

Design of the study

The study was designed to ascertain the views of parents in relation to the research questions and to connect their responses to the established literature on parenting capacity and on reading with children. As the Assessment Framework is used by social

workers, and often with the most vulnerable families, it was considered important to draw a sample from parents in a range of situations. It was therefore decided to recruit one sample of parents from a relatively advantaged suburb, and a second sample of parents who were voluntarily using family support services in a range of geographical locations. This provided the opportunity to consider whether all the parents, irrespective of social situation, had similar or dissimilar views on parenting, and to compare and contrast their reading practices with their children.

In paying attention to what the parents said, this may to some degree, avoid a criticism sometimes levelled at social work research that it is written by professionals for professionals, also the criticism that some social work research on parenting capacity is undertaken only from ordinary or privileged populations, thus excluding those children and families who might use social services provision the most. For example studies such as Ward (1995), which underpins the *Looked After Children* records, have been criticised for being too middle class, and having categories of assessment that are not relevant for children in poorer circumstances (Garrett, 2003; Jackson, 1998).

By having two samples of parents, the research gained from ideas about effective parenting from a range of parents in relatively different situations. This was to avoid constructing deficit models or accepting lower standards of care for children in poor economic circumstances. At the same time, it included the views of some parents whose circumstances were more mixed. This avoided a homogeneous sample and provided an opportunity to compare, contrast and contextualise by utilising a range of perspectives. Irrespective, of how the sample was recruited, exactly the same research instruments were used and the same interview process undertaken. The only difference was that some people were interviewed individually and some in small groups. The reasons for this are given when the samples are discussed further.

The research instrument

This can be found as Appendix 2. The next section outlines the purposes of the four parts of the research instrument.

Part A: The Assessment Framework dimensions baseline survey (research questions 1 and 2)

Part A was designed to explore the possibilities for a common and shared baseline about parenting capacity, and tested to what extent participants would agree with those categories which are endorsed in government publications. The parents were presented with the dimensions developed by those whose work influenced government guidance to practitioners on understanding and assessing the capacities of parents to care for their own children and is used in the Assessment Framework parenting capacity dimensions (Department of Health et al., 2000; Department of Health 2000). In the baseline survey (Part A) participants were asked to rate the dimensions in some detail, from 1 to 3 where:

1. = not at all important
2. = fairly important
3. =very important

Part A of the research instrument was analysed first, but was completed by participants after the part of the interview which asked open questions, Part B, and after undertaking Part C. Part D was usually completed last This was so that the parents' answers to the open questions were not influenced by seeing Part A. The parents' responses and the outcomes from the data are discussed in Chapter 5.

Part B: Parenting and literature questionnaire

(research questions 3-6)

Part B comprised 12 open questions, chosen to elicit the parents' views on good parenting. They were asked to consider parenting qualities (questions 1-3), to identify parents they admired or who influenced them and draw out the features of positive parenting that led to them choosing that person. These questions were phrased in this way in order to elicit a view on parenting capacities indirectly. Asking the parents to talk about someone they admired, meant the participants chose qualities they thought were important, without worrying about their own parenting abilities.

Question 4 asked the participants to identify the differences in parenting between themselves and their own parents, as family history is known to be a significant factor in parenting capacity. Question 5 asked about the parents' concerns when parenting in the twenty-first century. Question 6 asked where they would seek advice if they needed it. The juxtaposition of these two sets of questions, 1-3 and 4-6, allowed for exploration of parenting across the generations and some consideration of the extent that changes in the preoccupations of parents might be the outcome of changing social or contextual factors and/or personal experiences

The next set of questions, 7-12, asked the parents to talk about children's books. Questions 7 and 9 asked the parents what they had read recently with their children and about any other kind of reading they enjoyed. Question 8 asked them what they thought of the representation of parents in children's books. Question 10 asked the parents for their views on what they thought reading together with their children gave to them both. Questions 11 and 12 asked the parents where they bought books, and whether they used books to talk with children about particular events, such as starting school.

The data from all the responses to questions was later analysed thematically. The outcome is found in Chapters 6 to 8. Parts B and C of the interview were completed first, recorded on audiotape, and later transcribed. Parts A and D were completed next. A final open question was asked after Part A was completed. This was whether there was anything the parent thought they should try never to do. Table 1 shows the responses to this question. Table 2 shows what books the parents had read with their children recently. Table 3 shows where they obtained their books.

***Part C: Case study: illustrations from Shirley Hughes
(research questions 3-6)***

Part C was utilised to ask parents to respond to some illustrations from Shirley Hughes work. These were chosen because Shirley Hughes is a fairly well known author, and also consistently features in the top twenty most borrowed list published by the Public Lending Right on behalf of UK libraries and authors (see Appendix 3). The books were also chosen because they rely on pictures more than words, which meant the parent's literacy was not an issue. According to literary theorists (for example, Tucker, 1981) picture books are capable of enabling the sharing of meaning between people. This experiment tested the potential for using this method with parents.

Parents saw two anthologies, but their attention was also drawn to specific pictures chosen because they included men and women, a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and particular points in parents' and children's days, such as bedtimes and mealtimes. Shirley Hughes draws children doing very ordinary but pleasurable things in detail. The two sources were *The Nursery Collection* (1997) and *Things I Like* (2001). Parents were asked what they liked or did not like and what was like, or not like, them. The selected key illustrations can be seen in Appendix 2 with Part C of the research instrument. This part of the interview was purposefully experimental to assess:

- the usefulness of using a particular book to discuss aspects of parenting with parents;
- the extent to which this technique enabled them to talk differently, or in more detail, about parenting capacity and their own parenting;
- how books might enhance discussion, perhaps even in an assessment, and provide a vehicle for self reflection.

These responses were later analysed thematically from the transcriptions of the audiotape recordings.

Part D: Demographic data questionnaire and the consent form.

Demographic data, for use in contextualising, was also collected and can be found collated in Appendix 4. The personal nature of collecting demographic details from the participants was taken as an opportunity to give full information about the purposes of the research. It was also the point at which the consent form (Appendix 5) was signed by participants. This included contact details if they wished to withdraw subsequently or had concerns about participation. This did not happen.

Recruitment of the samples

The parents were found incrementally, from initial contacts, and recruited purposively to include two groups with some similarities and one key difference. The main criterion for inclusion was a willingness to participate and having a current role as a main carer, who read with at least one child between the ages of 0 and 12. A second criterion was that the parent was not currently involved in child protection investigations. The first group was 11 parents who had not used family support services. The second group was 22 parents all attending family support projects.

There was no attempt to select interviewees by gender, age, educational attainment, income or ethnic background, although this data was collected, and there were found to be some important differences after the data was collected. The sample was too small for any such findings to be statistically significant and the samples were not recruited to be representative of larger populations. The demographic information was gathered for contextual purposes. The aim was to be able to make comparisons between the first sample and the second, and between individuals within the whole sample of 33 parents.

Sample one (parents 1-11)

The sample was recruited through informal contacts, starting with the (non participant) leader of a parent and toddler group in a suburb of a midlands city. The suburb is characterised by good economic circumstances, high levels of education and slightly higher than average house prices for the city. It is considered desirable by young professionals and people raising families. None of these parents had contact with social work services, but used the usual health, leisure, education and other community resources. The outcome is a sample of individuals drawn from a particular kind of suburban social-economic background.

Sample two (parents 12-33)

This sample was recruited from family support projects, again through incremental contacting, by finding providers of services and requesting that they find people willing to be interviewed. The five projects, despite having different names and locations, were fairly similar in the way they operated. They all provided support services to children and their parents, including activity groups for children, individual and group work with parents. They all, to various degrees, involved the parents in selecting the programme and organising activities, but had paid staff to co-ordinate and provide group work and individual personal support to parents. All accepted

parents by self-referral and referral. None were carrying out child protection or other formal assessments of the parents.

All five centres met a specific community need by providing a place where parents and children could find help and support in a focussed but service user friendly way. The criteria for inclusion in the research project were:

- the main aim of the project was family support;
- the parent attended voluntarily at the time of interview;
- four parents were available individually, or in a group.

The family support projects are described briefly next.

Family support project 1

Parents 12, 13, 14

This project was run by a national voluntary organisation, linked to a school, and based in a semi-rural housing development on the northern edge of a small midlands town. It also served several small villages. It aimed to support parents and children through play activities, and provided pre-school preparation, thus easing transition into school for the children, and building links between parents living in scattered communities. The project workers were available to advise and help parents. A programme of activities, mainly play and understanding children type topics was running. The centre manager arranged appointments with four parents, three of whom attended. A fourth telephoned to say her child was ill. These parents attended especially for the interviews, so it was quite a commitment on their part.

Family support project 2

Parents 15, 16, 17, 18, 19

The project was a family centre funded by partnership between a national voluntary organisation, social services, and housing. It was situated in a small town at the centre of a large rural community. It served a disadvantaged part of a fairly affluent county town and offered support to children and parents through structured groups. The town had reasonable facilities but the social worker said that opportunities for work were very limited, pockets of extreme poverty existed, and drug use and other social issues were masked by the apparent prosperity. The project aimed to support, educate, and provide social events for parents and children in need. There was also a strand of therapeutic work undertaken in partnership with other agencies and an attached social worker.

Family support project 3

Parents, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24

The project was a family centre, funded by a national voluntary organisation, situated in the south west of a large city, within a sprawling public housing development. The immediate environs looked disadvantaged, with shops boarded up and the boarding covered by graffiti. The centre provided a family support programme, mainly offering social support such as play activities for children and group activities for parents. The staff had organised a group of interviewees who did not attend, so they recruited other parents from the drop in group. The parents were interviewed in two groups:

- Group 1: Parents 20, 21, 22.
- Group 2: Parents 23, 24.

Family support project 4

Parents, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29

The project was situated in a multicultural inner city area of an industrial city in the north and supported parents in the local multi-ethnic community by providing individual and group activities for parents and children. Parents with the time and the motivation were identified for interview. Two interview groups were arranged on the day. The project was working with some sensitive issues and some of the women were quite nervous of the tape recorder. Two staff members were active participants and interviewed. This reflected the egalitarian, partnership model of the project, and the two staff talked about their own families alongside the other three women.

- Group 1: Parents 25, 26, 27.
- Group 2: Parents 28, 29.

Family support project 5

Parents 30, 31, 32, 33

The project, run by a national voluntary organisation, provided parent support in a disadvantaged area of a small (formerly industrial) town in the north-west. This was the most economically deprived area of the five. The project provided social and play activities for parents and children. A mix of individual and paired interviews was undertaken. The relationships between the staff and service users appeared involved and egalitarian. The four parents all came from abusive and/or impoverished backgrounds. The community worker explained that the area is short of employment opportunities and that families had difficulty finding housing and recreational opportunities.

The next section of this chapter discusses how the data obtained from interviews with the parents is analysed and presented.

The interviews

All 33 participants met the researcher in their homes or privately at a family support project, individually in pairs, or in small groups. At the start of the interview the purpose of the research was outlined and the participants completed the consent form (Appendix 5). Feedback, in general, was that the interviews were enjoyable. The interviews took place between January 2002 and December 2003.

The research instrument was used in the order Parts B, C, A, D although it was analysed in the order Parts A, B, C, D. This was to avoid biasing the parents' responses to Parts B and C by them having previously seen Part A. Some family support project managers asked to see the research instrument before agreeing to their project taking part. Participants did not see the research instrument at that stage, but the purposes of the project were explained in advance by family support practitioners who recruited participants.

The first sample consisted of 11 individual interviews in the respondent's home. The second sample is a mix of individual, paired and group interviews undertaken in family support projects. Some respondents, recruited by family support projects, were initially less confident about taking part in a research project, so interviewing was responsive to local arrangements. Both samples drew mainly from parents who were either a full time carer for their children or working part-time. Only three parents had a full-time job at the time of interview.

Flexibility was needed for those not confident about being interviewed alone. At one project, where there was concern that ethnic minority sensitivities were respected, two people were interviewed together with a participant project worker, and an individual together with another participant project worker. Relationships between workers and project attendees seemed relaxed, and in interview everyone appeared

to speak on equal terms, with staff being as free with personal data as respondents. This kind of relationship in family support projects is not uncommon, and is a factor which research has shown (Department of Health, 1995, 2001; Smith, 1996) contributes to their popularity and their success.

Previous interviewing experience as researcher, social worker and counsellor led to confidence about interviewing technique. The classic counsellor's approach was adopted, creating an accepting environment but, withholding personal opinion in order to enable the other to articulate their own view (Egan, 1990; Jacobs, 1982; Seden, 2005). While counsellors aim to achieve a therapeutic outcome; the aim of using similar techniques here was limited to the objective of enabling respondents to express their own views. On occasions the interviewer prompted by repeating the parent's last words, which sometimes led to them speaking further.

The predetermined structure for questions was adhered to, and therefore researcher input is not often used when reporting data. In some of the interviews, if there were no crèche or the child did not want to go to it, a small child was present and obviously was not ignored. While everyone was asked the same questions, individuals decided on how, and at what length, and in whose company, they responded.

Data analysis

The analysis of the data is undertaken in the design order of the research instruments: Parts A, B, C, are reported on in turn and Part D provides contextual information.

The baseline survey: Part A

The completed Parts A were collated and the outcome can be found as Appendix 6. The information collated from Part A was gathered in order to test the views of the

whole sample on the Assessment Framework parenting capacity dimensions. This was to establish a baseline of agreement or disagreement, from which to proceed. The outcome is discussed in Chapter 5 and provides the underpinning for the decision to thematically analyse the interview data from the whole sample of 33 parents thereafter.

The interviews: Parts B and C

In Chapters 5-9 the responses of the people in both samples to the open questions are analysed with reference to *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (Department of Health et al., 2000; Jones, 2001) and the literature on children's reading. The thinking for the analysis is also informed by *Assessment of children in need and their families: a literature review* in *Studies Informing the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (Department of Health, 2001; Seden, 2001a) and the book *The Developing World of the Child* (Aldgate et al., 2006).

The choice of the contextual documents was purposeful, as the proposal for the thesis linked directly to the Assessment Framework. These publications, taken together with subsequent guidance, still provide a basis for evidence informed assessment of children's developmental needs, and parental capacity to meet those needs. As data is discussed within the context of this established research, consideration is also given to the possibilities of bringing in other less instrumental dimensions to the framework, and this is discussed in Chapter 10. The aim throughout the discussion of the data is to:

- compare the participants' views of parenting with the literature;
- compare and contrast parents' views with the Assessment Framework dimensions;
- explore which areas might be seen as foreground, and which as

more background with the parents;

- integrate the topic of reading with children and children's books into the dimensions for assessing parenting capacity;
- draw out themes which will lead to some recommendations for practice within current policy contexts.

The analysis of the qualitative data: Parts B, and C

One of the challenges of using qualitative methods is handling the variety and complexity of responses that occur, so that means to draw out the trends and key concerns can be found. At the same time, qualitative data of this kind is best suited to handle the complexities of the realities described by parents and the matters that they considered to be significant (Maluccio and Anderson, 2000). Therefore analysis of the open questions from the verbatim transcripts has been undertaken using the Assessment Framework dimensions of parenting capacity as a structure for the analysis.

Another way the variability of the data has been standardised is by predetermining certain factors through the research design. Thus, the role of the interviewer is scripted; the samples are chosen in a purposive way; the areas for consideration by the participants are sited within a particular subject, 'parenting capacity' and 'reading with children'. The questions are such that they can be answered by everyone from personal experience, and compared. All the participants were parents who read with their children, and that single common factor was central to the study. Other matters such as gender, social-economic situation, religion, or ethnicity impacted on their perspectives, and may be identified as relevant at certain points in the analysis, but they are not the main focus.

For example, there are struggles associated with parenting, such as domestic violence and sexual abuse, which could be discussed, if this were a different kind of research,

within one of the feminist paradigms (Harding, 1987; Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Tong, 1995). Here, gender and other issues are, at times implicit and at times explicit as the parents bring them in. It was assumed that parents all needed both personal capacity and appropriate support to meet their children's needs irrespective of class, gender, 'race', religion, ability or sexual orientation, and that children need to be parented well irrespective of their backgrounds. However from time to time, such contextual or personal data becomes relevant and is discussed.

While the parents' responses are analysed in relation to the Assessment Framework dimensions, the questions that were posed were open, and approached the issues of parenting qualities indirectly, so that parents gave their own views. Similarly the questions around reading, concerns and safety were phrased in such a way that the answers drew on, as far as possible, the parents' opinions, unaffected by detailed knowledge of the framework for analysis. Although this is not narrative research as described by theorists (Czarniawaska, 2004), the data carries the participants' accounts of their social lives as parents, and as such is both telling, organising and making meaning of experiences. However the data is not analysed using discourse analysis, or reconstructed. When parents' words are directly quoted they stand as generative words in their own right (Friere, 1973).

Parents were made aware that their views would be analysed in the context of social work ideas about parenting and reading to children, but only saw the parenting capacity dimensions (Part A) in the last section of the interview so that they were not influenced by them. The parents were asked if they had seen them before when given the section of the research instrument and no one had.

As Biehal (2004), comments, one of the dilemmas when analysing qualitative data in social policy contexts is that, in trying to grasp the complexity of each individual account, while also analysing across a sample, there is a risk of detaching the

response from the context of the interview. Therefore, while each person's data is analysed thematically in relation to the Assessment Framework, the data is also considered in the context of the interviewee data provided by Part D and other relevant personal or biographical circumstances which the respondent shared in their interview.

The first stage of analysis therefore was to build up a picture of how the parents understood good parenting in the context of the Assessment Framework definition of parenting capacity, to identify the main trends, and opinions about good parenting, while not losing sight of individual circumstances that might be contributing to, or impacting on, the person's perspective. This richer and fuller picture derived from qualitative, themed analysis, goes beyond the analysis of simple agreement, slightly modified by personal situation and perspective, which the baseline survey delivers.

The next step was to analyse what the parents said about reading with children, to bring that to bear on the conceptualisation of the parenting capacity dimensions, and to analyse how what the parents said about their reading experiences might link in to the means of articulating aspects of parenting capacity. Finally, using the technique of asking for the parents' responses to the book illustrations (Part C) and analysing those, it was possible to explore how a discussion of a particular set of images shed other kinds of light on how parents might talk about their own parenting capacities, practices and styles.

Building the analysis in this multilayered way, from a clearly articulated framework, enabled the identification of connections across the areas the research questions sought to examine, to begin to identify where some of the synergies might lie between understanding parenting capacity and the ordinary activity of reading between parents and children. Such conclusions from a sample of 33 are provisional, yet are capable of indicating areas that are relevant to parents, social workers and

policy contexts, and which might be explored further through research activity.

So far this chapter has outlined what has been done, in order that the process by which the analysis and discussion were reached is transparent. This enables an assessment of the extent to which there are reasonably objective, sufficiently valid enough generalisable outcomes within contemporary policy contexts for children and families. The study explores the patterns and relationships between a related set of concepts in a way that has not previously been attempted. In doing so it contextualises new data into an established framework. The choice of the framework is now discussed further.

The framework for analysis

Qualitative researchers have to respond to what Johnson (2000) describes as shifting, ambiguous, fragmented data which is also often rich, diverse and complex. This research strategy was designed to respond to the challenge of undertaking research into a set of relationships. The research is empiricist in the sense that experiences are being drawn on to examine pre-existing propositions about parenting and the role of children's books in parent-child interactions. The underpinning assumptions are therefore embedded in the research instruments, and in the framework used to analyse the data, which derive from the literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3.

The research is underpinned by the validity (subject to scrutiny and evaluation) of research that has been undertaken over the years on child development and parenting capacity in the discipline of developmental psychology (Bee, 1995; Daniel et al., 1999; Rutter and Hay, 1994; Rutter et al., 1994). *The Developing World of the Child* (Aldgate et al., 2006) has also provided an overview and update of developmental understandings of children, for all practitioners who work with children and their families, which is background to this study.

The pervasive influence of developmental theory in social work theorising and practice is easily evidenced in relation to all service user groups (Seden and Katz, 2003), including children and their parents. This particular evaluation of knowledge and the applications to social work practice may be provisional and yet be extended. The accumulation of research evidence confirming and replicating other studies has, over the years, been the best foundation for knowledge. Social work, unlike some other disciplines, has relied on an eclectic approach to knowledge building, which has now become established and identifiable (Adan et al., 2002; Compton and Galaway, 1989; Coulshed, 1991; Coulshed and Orme, 1998; Lishman, 1991; Payne, 1997, 2005; Seden, 2001b; Trevithick, 2005).

Such literature is not however accepted uncritically. For example early work in developmental psychology was unaware of the oppression carried in language. Assumptions were made about mothers as sole and primary carers, and there were stereotypes of families as consisting of two married adults and children. Such assumptions have been questioned (for example, Dallos, 1993). Some concepts have stood the test of time subject to scrutiny, re-evaluation and reinterpretation, as societal contexts have changed and new data become available. For example, despite revision and development, attachment theory is still pivotal in thinking about children's lives, their relationships with caregivers and others, the transitions they make, the losses they face and the impact of this on their own later adult lives and parenting styles.

Similarly Maslow's (1943) theorising on need remains influential (Sugarman, 1986), and Maslow's influence traceable in the Assessment Framework parenting capacity dimensions. Despite misuse to suggest that only mothers could be the child's focus of attachment, Bowlby's work (1988) has proved durable when subjected to re-evaluative writing from more current social perspectives (Aldgate and Jones, 2006;

Howe, 1995; Owusu-Bempah, 2006; Rashid, 1996). Similarly, Winnicott's (1960) comment that he never saw a mother or a child but a 'mother and a child' points to the nature of the relatedness of a child and carer and the transactional element of childcare which remains relevant despite the gender specific way in which it was first expressed.

This study accepts the validity of developmental psychology and the life course approaches as underpinning knowledge for understanding children, adults who care for them and their family relationships (Dunn, 1984, 1993). Starting from established, research based frameworks and accepting them, although not unquestioningly or uncritically, is a way of enabling the work to eliminate some variability in order to look at: the relationship between a prescribed means for social workers to assess parenting capacity, parental perspectives on those categories, and parents' views about the value of reading with children.

The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families

(Department of Health et al., 2000) therefore provides a themed framework for analysis of new data, in the shape of the specific dimensions for conceptualising parenting capacity provided for social workers and other current practitioners.

Inevitably, the ideas on parenting capacity it encapsulates will change, be enhanced and/or challenged by commentators, and perhaps be influenced by the outcomes of this study. Critically, the accumulation of knowledge it represents can be isolated at this point in time against which to test other matters. As new data from parents is compared with the dimensions, new insights into the ways they are conceptualised may be generated.

While the focus is necessarily on parenting capacity dimensions, child factors (developmental needs) and wider environmental factors (family and environmental

factors) in the Assessment Framework remain contingent and relevant. It is just that for the purposes of this work they are not the main subject. Neither is the social construction of childhood and parenting as discussed in the literature (Foley et al., 2001; Stainton-Rogers, 1992) central, although this will also be embedded in the participants' views of the meaning of parenting and childhood. Attention will be given to social contexts as needed.

The use of this framework to generate new ideas about parenting and reading is essentially interactionist. There is a recognition of the impossibility of objective truths in areas subject to social research and a recognition that meaning may well come from engagement with the 'lived realities' of the people who engage with social work services either as service users or practitioners (Henderson and Seden, 2004). The meanings thus constructed change through dialogue both between people and the knowledge available at any point in time. However this cannot be done in a social or personal vacuum:

The way parents, define, interpret and give social meaning to their situation at any moment is closely related to previous experience, even to the peculiarities of their own upbringing ...

(Cleaver and Freeman, 1995: 15)

Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodology which was designed to address the research questions. The study examines some human developmental processes (parenting capacity and parent-child reading) and how the participants contribute to the construction of meaning in that area within the confines of a framework.

The value of working this way, rather than asking participants just to talk about parenting or reading is ethical, in that parents were not constrained in what they said, neither were they left wondering what kind of response was wanted or subjected to an interview where they were not conscious of the interviewer's intent. The managers of family and parent centres, who thought the parents might be vulnerable to thoughtless interviewing, were particularly reassured to see the structure and questions in advance.

The Assessment Framework dimensions provide a tool for analysis, by neatly containing many assumptions about parenting capacity, against which these parents' views and their thoughts on another dimension, reading with children, can be analysed, with the intention of generating some creative connections.

The next chapter introduces the samples in more depth, discusses some contextual considerations and discusses the outcomes of the baseline survey.

Chapter 5

Characteristics of the samples: data from the baseline survey

Proclaiming the importance of choosing one's research methods in relation to the ways in which research problems are formulated and conceptualised, the view is taken that, it is important to treat the data sets produced by each method as complementary rather than to integrate them unproblematically.

(Brannen, (1992), *Mixing Methods, Qualitative and Quantative Research*: xiii).

Introduction

Chapters 6-9 analyse the participants' views using the parenting dimensions of the Assessment Framework. This chapter prepares the ground for that analysis in two ways. First it discusses the two samples and second, it presents the analysis of the baseline survey (Part A). These discussions underpin the decision to analyse the views of both samples together hereafter.

A main assumption about parenting, underpinning the research, is that most parents were doing their best to raise their children and would remain capable of doing so with support as needed (Maluccio, 1997; Maluccio and Anderson, 2000). There was no prior knowledge of whether parents had been involved in child protection investigations, or why parents were involved with family support projects unless it emerged in their account. While interviewing the parents, whether using family support services or not, it was assumed that they were managing to be good enough parents, each in their own way

The parents are identified by an interview number throughout the presentation of the data in Chapters 6-8. The samples are referred to as sample 1 (parents 1-11); sample 2 (parents 12-33) and/or the whole sample (parents 1-33). The size of the sample makes numbering preferable to names and is not intended to depersonalise,

the intention is to present an analysis which gives the parents a voice. Direct quotations from the parents' transcripts within the text are in italic. The information about their individual social and economic profiles can be found as Appendix 5. The discussion that follows relies both on the demographic data (Part D) and contextual information given in interviews.

Characteristics of sample 1

The parents in sample 1 were white women, living in comfortable economic circumstances, in a residential suburb of a midlands city. They were raising children with support from parents, neighbours or friends easily available. They had educational, recreational, leisure and other community facilities within easy reach. None of them had needed help with their parenting beyond the usual universal services from health and education, although they might have discussed their children's progress with friends or their own parents. One parent (8) had needed health services because her child had specific health needs, and was very critical of the slow response to her own identification of a hearing impairment and her son's subsequent delayed speech.

The children appeared safe and their welfare was being promoted without any special state intervention. Furthermore, these parents often had aspirations which would take them beyond the conceptualisation of good enough parenting, seeking the enhancement of children's opportunities through investing time in activities including reading with children, because of having the means and leisure to do so. This contrasts with some of the pressures on some, but by no means all, the parents in sample 2.

The parents all had aspirations for their children in terms of a good start at school and future educational achievement. Many saw their parenting capacities as crucial to

the maximum development of their children's potential, and some had set aside career opportunities or become part-time workers to focus on being a parent. They used their professional skills when child rearing and had no worries about basic economic or local environmental issues, leaving them able to pay attention to other issues. For example, one parent, a teacher (2), added to the baseline survey questionnaire that it was important to *bring out the sensitive side of boys*.

These parents had all experienced good levels of education themselves, at least 'O' levels or GCSE, and 5 had degrees. They had all experienced some job satisfaction in their own right, whether they had subsequently become full time parents or kept on some paid part or full time employment. Several of them brought a professional perspective to parenting (G.P.; teacher; childminder; special needs support worker; nurse), although the respondents were not asked about the impact of their professional knowledge on parenting and no one specifically referred to it as a major influence.

The youngest parent was 22, with a 7 month old child, and the oldest 47 with children of 24, 20 and 2. One participant was a grandmother and childminder aged 57. Excluding the grandmother, the mean age for the first child was 27.3 years. Apart from the age range there was otherwise little diversity in this sample in terms of socio-economic situation, gender or ethnicity which contrasts with the second sample. Wider family and friends were consistently a support, and the few experiences of adversity were mitigated by supportive environments and economic well-being.

The parents showed some awareness of advantage and disadvantage but in a largely theoretical way. This contrasts sharply with some of the reality based comments from some economically disadvantaged parents in sample 2. When they spoke of disadvantage or worry it was sometimes fear of the unknown rather than any lived

reality. For example the concern of some, that adolescent children might experiment with drugs, was different from the anger of two parents from sample 2 who regularly saw needles and other debris from drug use in the local park.

It may be interesting to query the aspirational elements, and to ask to what extent this was care and to what extent it might be interpreted as control in terms of passing on values or reinforcing desired social attitudes. One of the reasons for living in this particular geographical area was likely to have been the presence of like-minded families and the availability of, and proximity to, a range of diverse and reasonably successful state and private schools, including Church of England and Roman Catholic provision at primary level.

Some of the parents, however, felt that the educational aspirations of families in the area put a lot of pressure on less academic children and wanted other kinds of ability to be more valued. There is also the question therefore about the extent to which children's reading was directed, and choices made for them, to preserve a way of life, and the extent to which the challenge of stories of other kinds of lifestyles was a threat or challenge. Several of the parents were clear that they were fortunate to be able to bring their children up in this particular environment.

For many families like the sample 1 parents, good health and education may be taken for granted. While these 11 families benefited from good social environments and positive enough family relationships, the Sample 2 parents had a more mixed experience which is considered next.

Characteristics of sample 2

This sample of parents was more diverse, but as in sample 1 the parents all had personal strengths and aspirations for their children. They had in common, that they had all chosen to attend at family support projects. If some parents had been subject to social work

intervention in the past this was not currently the case. There was, however, no easy homogeneity in the group. The parents only had attendance at a family support project in common and the reasons for attending were varied. Two of the parents interviewed were project workers

The 22 parents came from five different parts of England and a mix of urban and semi-rural environments. Two participants were fathers, the rest mothers. Some parents defined themselves as white British, others identified the following self definitions: relaxed easy going Scottish cross (1), Irish/British (1), English/Iranian (1), Japanese (1), Black British (1), Pakistani (1), Asian Hindu (1). Only 2 parents had degrees and these were the two staff member participants. Nine had achieved GCSEs or the equivalent and within that group two had NNEB and one a nursing SRN qualification. Nine parents had left school with little or no formal qualifications; two were studying for part time degrees. This contrasts with sample 1 where all had continued their education at least to GCSE level.

Twelve people were supported by partner's incomes. The two who had their own salaries were the two project workers who participated to support the women attending the project. Eleven families were living on benefits. The average age of the respondents was 29 and the sample included a grandmother (aged 57) who was also a childminder. Coincidentally sample 1 also contained a grandmother who was also a childminder. The age at which the participants had started caring for their own children ranged from 17 at one end to 30 at the other. The participants were caring for 47 children between them ranging from 10 months to 10. Three parents who had professional qualifications (nursery officer or nurse) had decided to be full time parents.

Importantly, individuals were recruited to the research in their role as parent, not as service users, even though they were using a non universal service. This is an

important distinction because, although the interviews took place in family support projects, the interview schedule and approach to the interviews was the same for all participants in the research. Some people chose to be interviewed in pairs or groups which reflected some feelings of vulnerability about the process, which was respected. Some of the respondents were using the project simply for enhancement of their parenting and their child's opportunities, or to lessen social isolation. Some were possibly engaging with the more therapeutic aspects of what the project offered.

Four participants struggled with their own literacy, one because English was her second language. Several parents, as will become apparent as the data is presented, had unhappy and challenging childhood experiences which impacted on their own parenting. Throughout, the focus of the research was on each person's view of parenting capacity, their own parenting abilities, their views of the books they read with their children, and the value of the activity. However the diversity and, at times disadvantaged or impoverished experiences found in this sample make it different from sample one. Although personal history affected the content of what all respondents in both samples said, it is in sample 2 that some disadvantages that might impact on children are seen.

At the same time the parenting aspirations of sample 2 were not different from sample 1. The parents were not all disadvantaged, far from it, but nonetheless the majority were not as materially well off as those in the first sample, and overall the communities were not so well resourced. Using the family support project was sometimes for support on personal matters, and sometimes because it was a resource supplementing and enhancing the community provision for children and families. The second sample brought in features that the first sample did not. There were parents on benefits and parents unable to read themselves. The households were less

stereotypical, two fathers were main carers and, as already identified, several parents were from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Some considerations relating to contexts

During interviews, and in the early stages of data analysis, it could be seen that life space and economic opportunities were impacting on the parents. While all the parents were motivated and had aspirations to do their best, the quality of what the children were experiencing was very diverse. This supports the findings of work drawing attention to the importance of communities in supporting children and their parents (Jack, 1997; Jack and Gill, 2003; Jack and Jordan, 1999).

All the parents' responses showed how childhood experiences may have an impact on your attitude to your parenting capacity, including the wish to offer a different experience to your own children. In particular, personal and emotional behaviours and responses are shaped by childhood experience. As the interviews progressed, it began to emerge that parents in both samples could agree about many parenting aspirations, but that also, for some, impoverished backgrounds could lead to impoverished opportunities to parent. However, all the parents wanted to give their children more than they had, and to improve on what they received, as this short extract from an interview illustrates:

Parent 30: *I will try to give my kids a life they want, and not a life that I had. My chaotic lifestyle was being abused and all sorts of stuff.*

Interviewer: *What are you are trying to give him that you didn't have?*

Parent 30: *Well, you try to give them the love and care. I like to take them out, like on holidays and that. Like they get their holidays that we never had when we were young.*

Much theoretical discussion about parenting, and the psychodynamic understanding of human growth and development, emphasises the impact of early experiences on the growing child and has highlighted the influence of early experience on individuals' subsequent ability to become effective parents themselves. There is no deterministic conclusion to draw about cycles of deprivation being necessarily repeated, but neither can the effects of past childhood experiences on present parenting be ignored.

On the one hand, there is a substantial literature about resilience and the ability of children to bounce back from adversity and become good parents in their own adult life (Gilligan, 1997, 2001; Rutter, 1985, 1992, 1993). On the other hand, there remains a clear link between early experiences and behaviour in adult life across a range of parenting dimensions (Jacobs, 1998). In these two samples this encompassed a range of individual experiences from repeating the past because *it worked and I was happy* (8) to a resolve *never to do to my children what my parents did to me* (32).

However, all the parents, irrespective of socio-economic factors, sought to make parenting fun, safe, warm and stimulating. Books and reading were very clearly a part of that process for all the families, although in different ways, as will be discussed in the fuller analysis. The interviews raised particular perspectives within the main research questions. These are:

- To what extent can reading books tackle some parenting issues?
- Are parents' own capacities enriched when reading with children?
- Are books a way of enlarging children's and parents' experiences and dealing with hurts and deficits?
- Are books used to control and pass on parents' values and social attitudes?

As Crotty says:

We plan our research in terms of an issue or problem or question. What we go on to ask are the further problems or questions implicit in the one we start with.

(Crotty, 1998: 12)

The parents in the two samples had many significant attributes in common, such as enjoying reading with their children and a motivation to do their best for their children. However, as their views are analysed, different perspectives and life experiences emerge, from time to time, as relevant to the data analysis. This chapter now considers the baseline survey which relates to all the participants in the project, the outcome of which underpins the decision to treat the sample as a whole in the subsequent thematic analysis.

The baseline survey

The aim of Part A of the research was to assess the extent to which all the parents agreed or disagreed with the parenting dimensions used in the Assessment Framework. This would also show the extent to which the views of the parents, on what was desirable in looking after children, had common ground across the board irrespective of individual and social differences. Professionals have given much attention to the subject of parenting capacity, but rarely have parents been consulted. It was therefore decided that it would be helpful to test the extent to which the participants in the sample could assent to the dimensions of parenting capacity as articulated in the Assessment Framework, which would subsequently be used as a framework for analysing data, before seeking more in-depth views about parenting and children's literature.

The participants were asked to complete Part A of the research instrument after the

interviews based on open questions (Parts B and C). Respondents completed Part A on paper individually unless they needed help or had a query about what a particular dimension was. This was rare, and the only term that repeatedly needed clarification was 'shaping behaviour' which was redefined as 'influencing a child's behaviour' in some way. If the adult could not read, the categories were read out and the participant ringed the number themselves. Care was taken to check that all the respondents knew which number meant what, as it is relatively easy in these circumstances to record the precise opposite of what you mean. The scoring range was limited to not important (1), fairly important (2) and very important (3) to make the scoring easy to do reasonably quickly and to enable the quick identification of polarities between people.

Respondents could alter or add to the areas outlined and were asked to complete a section headed: 'What parents should try never to do'. The 'try' was inserted at the request of a non-participant with whom the questionnaire was piloted. When respondents were given Part A it was explained that: there were no rights and wrongs; experts are not necessarily right; it was important to have a parent's perspective on this material. It was emphasised verbally that agreement or disagreement was equally acceptable, as endorsement of the government, social workers or other professionals was not what was sought. Five parents from the second sample sent the completed Part A back after the interview, having requested time to think about anything they might want to add.

The outcome can be seen as Appendix 6 and Table 1. The findings are discussed next using the parenting capacity dimensions of the Assessment Framework, which were the headings used for the survey questions.

The findings from Part A

As it turned out, there was a high level of agreement with the dimensions overall, with very little difference between the two samples. This is an important point for

the study, as one purpose of beginning the research in this way was to check whether all the parents irrespective of differences, such as gender, ethnic origins or socio-economic background, would have similar levels of agreement or disagreement about basic parenting capacities. The parents' views on each broad category are now presented in turn.

Basic care

No-one thought anything under this heading was unimportant. Some parents added that the emotional side of care was important too, and this is an emphasis which will recur in the qualitative data. On the topic of keeping children clean, both groups of parents thought that this was only fairly important. The family support centre parents were clear that children needed to play and occasionally be dirty. As one parent wrote:

Children at times are deliciously dirty and then you know they had a good play day. (19)

Safety

There was broad agreement on the necessity to keep children safe, and two main areas emerged. There was some concern about safety in the home, burns, scalds and accidents. Some parents in sample 2 thought that teaching children about safety was a useful thing to do. Both sets of parents were more worried about dangers outside of their control such as pressures from society to use drugs, and the risks from strangers, especially paedophiles. Danger outside of the home was a major preoccupation of many parents. No one seemed overly concerned about childhood illnesses, as previous generations might have been, but some worried about safety at school and bullying.

Emotional warmth

This was scored very highly, with encouragement, making a child feel valued, cuddles, praise, and respect seen as most important. The parents added honesty and openness as important components for building trust, and one person commented on the need to encourage the sensitive side of boys. Giving a sense of cultural identity was consistently scored only as fairly important (2) by sample 1 and most of sample 2. It was scored as not very important (1) by three parents. Of the 11 parents who did score it as very important (3), 5 are parents from an ethnic minority background. One parent commented on the need to instil confidence in children and teach them that:

Everyone is equal no matter what. (22)

Another commented that cultural identity should be discussed:

When the time is right for the child ... (23)

Those attending family support projects were more articulate and attached more significance to this area. Partly this was an outcome of personal experiences; possibly it was an outcome of exposure to anti-discriminatory policies and practices in the projects. Possibly sample 1 took it for granted, but overall it was often rated as fairly important by the second sample of parents.

Stimulation

There is agreement that this dimension is important or very important, but some parents scored 'sending children to school and other activities' as only fairly important (2). This reflected their concerns about the word 'send' especially in relation to 'other activities'. They thought children should only go to activities that they enjoyed and that while encouraging learning was very important, it should not

become a source of pressure for children. One parent from sample 2 commented that all children are different and their needs should be met at their own level. Some parents in sample 1 were particularly aware of educational pressure in their community, and the detrimental affect on some children who were more practical than academic.

Guidance and boundaries

The score sheet for this area shows the most variation in scoring with as many 2s (fairly important) as 3s (very important). The parents were comfortable on the whole with scoring highly items such as: encouraging a range of experiences, teaching values, setting boundaries and considering others highly. However, when it came to stronger statements such as making rules, discipline, shaping behaviour, there are more parents in both samples scoring it as 2 (fairly important). This is consistent with many of the comments in the parents' narratives where changes to a more child-centred approach to parenting, with less discipline of the kind they themselves experienced, is often described. Both groups of parents were disinclined to hard and fast rules saying that consistency was important but difficult to achieve. On the whole they agreed that adults should accept and recognise emotions in children while not crying or being angry themselves in front of children. Without exception, the preferred a discipline style which offered children choices, openly involving them in decisions and aiming for a mutual approach.

Stability

Again, there was more variation here in the scoring. Parents largely agreed that a safe family environment, being there, consistency, and emotional warmth were very important. Keeping contact with wider family was seen as fairly important but there was some ambivalence about contact with absent parents and siblings. The people who answered this theoretically were more inclined to rate it at 3 (very important).

Those who had experience of contact and separation either personally or as a result of fostering were inclined to rate it at 2 (fairly important). The one person who had been in care herself rated this at 1 (not important). The views of some people that family contact was less important seemed to reflect personal awareness of possible tensions and difficulties. One parent commented that she would not allow her child contact with someone who had abused him or her. On flexibility, and adaptation to change, about a third of the parents thought it very important, but some said they thought children needed stability and predictability, and scored it lower accordingly.

What parents should try never to do

The parents provided an impressive list of what parents should 'try to never do' (see Table 1) and the strongest message was that children should be respected and not undermined or put down. While physical abuse was mentioned as something unacceptable by many parents, by far the most of them were concerned to show children respect and to value them. They clearly saw criticism of children, belittling them, or humiliating them in front of friends, as particularly unhelpful for the child. There was also a thread of answers which identified that adults should not force their beliefs onto children, put them in harmful situations, or use them to satisfy their own emotional needs. Parent 33, whose own childhood, by her own account, had been unpleasant, said:

Do not push your child in to something he or she does not want to do. Do not give them too much responsibility like jobs round the house or opening doors for strangers or push them to do too much homework. There can be too much responsibility to cope with and it's the parent's job not the child's.

In studying the collated responses, it can also be noticed that the majority of things that the participants said 'parents should try never to do' related to the area of guidance and boundaries. This finding will therefore be revisited when the parents' views on guidance

and boundaries are analysed in Chapter 7.

Main points

Irrespective of background, capability and experience, the parents showed awareness of children's emotional needs. On the whole, they described a parenting capacity where children come first and parents try to be consistent, open and honest, and to model and negotiate desirable behaviours. Many acknowledged that this was easier said than done, but at the very least it could be seen that:

- On the whole the parents confirm what the professionals consider to be desirable parenting qualities.
- The parents set themselves high standards and aimed to be child-centred.
- There were no substantial differences in view between sample 1 and sample 2, although there were diverse experiences and perspectives.
- In both samples, parents often showed thoughtfulness and awareness of some of the nuances and subtleties of parenting within these dimensions.

Overall, the parents identified with the Assessment Framework dimensions on parenting capacity, with some provisos and some discussion and extension. They are of course right to want to contextualise and explore such dimensions in the light of their own experiences and contexts:

Parenting capacities and behaviour are therefore complex, and subject to influences within the family and from outside. The notion of mere dimensions of parenting can therefore be seen as wanting, unless we are prepared to embed these dimensions of parenting within a broader framework.

(Jones, 2001: 25)

The responses to Part A showed no significant difference between the two samples in terms of their motivation towards their children, and their willingness to talk about parenting. There was also little variation in their level of acceptance of the dimensions of parenting capacity, which suggested that the best approach was to discuss the sample as a whole, while remaining alert to particular circumstances where an individual's structural socio-economic, or inner psychological factors, become relevant.

It was interesting to find that 33 parents who were on the whole, not aware of the assessment tools that social workers use were, with one or two minor exceptions, in basic agreement with the dimensions of parenting capacity. This may say something about the pervasiveness of cultural messages about raising children, especially from magazines and the Internet, and the hold of developmental psychology on popular as well as professional childcare literature. Attitudinal differences, based on notions of class, as described by Cleaver and Freeman (1995), seemed less clear cut in this group of parents, yet the socio-economic and cultural opportunities families had to achieve their aspirations and goals still mattered.

It was also interesting that Maluccio's (1997) optimism about the good intentions and capabilities of most parents are borne out in this sample. From richest to poorest, from the recipients of loving parenting to those who were abused in childhood, every parent was trying to do as well, better, or much better for their own children. Irrespective of educational attainment, the parents were all capable of being reflective about the dimensions. In both samples parents equally, added to and queried items, and asked questions about the purposes of the research before agreeing to go ahead. Motivation to take part in the research and engage with the process was very evident throughout.

Summary

The baseline survey showed that, in general, most parents in the sample confirmed that they found the Assessment Framework dimensions of parenting capacity relevant enough to them.

However, this scoring of the relative importance they attributed to the parenting capacity dimensions could not show the extent or quality of capacity that the parents brought to meeting children's needs. Nor could it show in detail just how the parents would themselves articulate the dimensions of parenting capacity through discussing parents they admire and exploring their own preferred styles in more detail. Further, it could not provide information about the practice of reading with children or the contribution this activity contributes to enhancing children's situations and the parents' capacity.

Thus while there was substantial agreement in principle about capacities in the quantitative contextual data, it is the qualitative data derived from Part B and the discussion of the illustrations in Part C that is best capable of showing subtle or substantial differences and diversities and nuances in the detail of what parents think and do.

The next four chapters turn to the presentation of the analysis of the qualitative data.

Chapter 6

Basic care, ensuring safety, emotional warmth: parents' views.

Introduction

This is the first of four chapters which consider the parents' views in detail, considering their perspectives against received social work practice guidelines in the shape of the Assessment Framework. As Chapter 4 shows, the parents were a diverse group. Sample 1 overall were more socially and economically advantaged than sample 2 and some parents in sample 2 noticeably more socially and economically disadvantaged than the other parents (Appendix 4). It is also the case that some parents in sample 2 experienced significant disruptions and derailment, in their own childhoods, which they believed had affected their lives and capacities as parents. Irrespective of background and experience, the parents all expressed motivation to parent their children as well as possible in their own contexts.

Seldom are parents asked about the dimensions against which social workers assess them, and yet it will become apparent that all the parents in this sample were able and willing to engage in discussion about what makes for good parenting. This chapter considers what they said about basic care, ensuring safety and emotional warmth in the interviews. The research questions implicitly asked parents to prioritise what they valued in parenting by asking them to identify what they admired in other parents, as well as to identify their own concerns. All childcare takes place in social and historical situations, with particular preoccupations. Qualitative social sciences research in this area always has to take account of this and of a range of differentials (Cleaver and Freeman, 1995; Thoburn et al., 1995) and this discussion is no exception. The parents own words are in *italic*, the number in brackets refers to individual parents, not quantities of parents, unless stated.

Basic care

The Assessment Framework defines basic care as:

Providing for the child's physical needs, and appropriate medical and dental care.

Includes provision of food, drink, warmth, shelter, clean and appropriate clothing and adequate personal hygiene.

This basic requirement represents the minimum necessary if a child is to be considered to be receiving adequate care. In the past, many children were brought up in cold, impoverished and not very hygienic homes. However all the 33 parents interviewed in this study, including one person awaiting rehousing, were able to take clean, warm homes for granted and assume they would receive reasonable health provision. This was the least of the parents' preoccupations, because on the whole basic care was simply expected to be reasonable. Thus the parents were not as engaged with issues of basic care as they might have been in previous generations, and it was a grandmother who spoke most about it.

Assumed standards

Basic care, therefore, was not overly mentioned by the parents, when asked what made for a good parent. The grandmother (19) in sample 2 identified basic care dimensions as what she would look for first in a good parent. All the other participants chose elements of emotional warmth. Parent 19 did not dwell long on basic care, moving on to emotional components:

She is a good parent the house is clean and tidy, they always have their baths and that, she talks to them and you know, tries her best to keep them in order and that, which we all know is difficult. And she teaches them manners ... and she loves them to death.

She also commented that:

I've got it easy now I haven't got children, I've got a dishwasher, freezer and all the food in it. I wish I had what I've got now then.

Only one parent (9) initially chose role models who provided well materially but she still also talked about the emotional climate as:

... very relaxed and they love the child very much ... they've got quite professional jobs ... they have a nice house, he doesn't want for anything ... he's got lots of little things and they get nice things for him ...

This assumption of reasonable hygiene, cleanliness, warmth and food was a direct reflection of the reasonable material standards enjoyed by all participants, even the poorest. When talking about how basic care was carried out, the parents showed how styles of physical care have become more flexible and relaxed.

A range of flexible responses

Some parents referred briefly to a range of physical matters within their narratives and four of the poorer parents were concerned about buying enough sweets, toys, and in one case, a quad bike (30, 31, 32, 33), a topic not mentioned in sample 1 except by parent 9. Meeting physical needs included providing transport to activities (6 parents in sample 1), although discussion of the significance of giving time is best discussed under the topic, stimulation, in the next chapter. Many parents in sample 1 spent time taking children to activities and clubs. In sample 2, two parents considered it important to take children out for days, so that shared physical activity, travelling by walking, public transport or going out in cars was part of basic care.

The biggest theme relating to physical care was flexibility and included housework, toilet-training and other matters which used to be subject to the concept of routine. This new (as the respondents saw it) flexibility in parenting styles is best exemplified by the parents' views on mealtimes. Several parents spoke of being more relaxed than their own parents and abandoning set mealtimes at the table for a more flexible approach. This is typified by parents 8 and 10 who said:

He doesn't have to sit at the table for his meals all the time. If I feel that he's eaten enough of his dinner he's allowed his pudding even if he hasn't finished it. (8)

I am sure my parents would never have allowed us to sit down at different times and eat different things ... I am not as formal with bedtimes and things like that. (10)

There was no mention of keeping to routines for mealtimes by anyone, rather the opposite, although by contrast parents tended to see bedtime as a special part of the day which benefited from some structure, including a bath and story. The giving of choice to children about when to eat and wash was universal with the parents who mentioned it. As parent 17 commented:

My mum and dad kept to a routine. Like getting up in the morning, give them their breakfast, then bath them straightaway. I actually ask my children if they want their breakfast before they want a bath or whether they want it after ... because a child might not be hungry when you want them to eat. They might be hungry an hour after or an hour before.

The move to being led by the child's needs and listening to their views about food, clothing and hygiene was strikingly consistent, and child-centredness is a theme in the parents' responses. It recurred in relation to other topics, and any parent who did not take a child-

centred approach, on any aspect of parenting, would have stood out. One parent (5) would have liked to maintain a different lifestyle about mealtimes but had bowed to pressure from the children's knowledge of the customs of other families, and finally prioritised the children's different after-school activities over regular family mealtimes. Another spoke of how adjustments to basic ways of doing things were changing in her family:

I have adapted to today's lifestyle. I am not formal; there are so many things to fit in. A lot of it is peer pressure: so and so is allowed to do it... sometimes I say well I disagree with that, but at other times it's just because I never thought about it, so we talk about things and if I can't see anything wrong with it and it's reasonable ... (10)

Parents were adapting therefore, to changes in other families beside their own over basic matters such as mealtimes and bedtimes, and older children particularly were taking a lead in the process. There was also evidence of discussion about how things were done in the home. This was a reflection of better material standards, and of less time spent worrying about the basics of care.

All the parents were reasonably housed, although one parent was staying with her parents after separating from a partner. Reasonable personal hygiene, cleanliness, enough clothes and food, were taken for granted by all, including the poorest parents. Those who were relatively disadvantaged in societal terms were still better off materially compared with their own parents. This was particularly noticed by a grandmother, parent 19, who said:

My daughter's better off than what I was so they are getting more material things.

Access to health care was also expected, and when commented upon, it tended to be about getting the right, not just any, treatment (parents 8 and 15). However, parents were housed

in varied social environments, as will be seen when ensuring safety is discussed, and this had a substantial impact on the parents' views on physical safety.

Gender and basic care

The 31 mothers undertook most of the basic care of children, especially where a male partner had employment taking him away from home for long hours. Where this was the case, the mothers were concerned to keep their partners in touch with what was happening with the children. Parent 13 had a husband who came home after their daughter was in bed, and said:

I try to include him as much as possible in the decisions. Everything about her we discuss. It's because he's not there all the time it is down to me. My dad he was out at work all the time, he would say, 'Go ask your mum', so I try to include him.

Parent 14 also adapted her parenting to include her husband:

We both discuss what he (the child) wants to do. C (the husband) does work away from home in the week, so if I have to make a decision on my own it is difficult, but decisions are made on the spot every day. At the weekend we all sit down and discuss what's been going on in the week.

Unless separated from the child's other parent, the mothers expected partner involvement in basic childcare at some level. They also expected that time would be spent talking over how the children were progressing. Only one person described herself as *lucky* because her partner helped with meals, bathtimes and playing with the children. Nonetheless, despite an expectation of male involvement in at least bathtime, playing and reading with children, or making decisions, the bulk of the basic child rearing was being carried out by the women. Seven parents had set aside their own employment to be full-time parents and five were

working part-time. Only three parents had a full-time job outside of the home and of those, one was concerned about the effect on her daughter:

The one thing that I still feel guilty about and I have this terrible angst about ... I feel that I should be staying at home and I can't. Basically I couldn't face being a full-time mum now, which horrifies me that I can't do it ... I stayed at home with the other two ... but I feel guilty about staying at home with them while poor old H goes to the nursery ... but she does what I want her to be doing because I picked the nursery carefully. (7)

The two fathers in the sample were the main carers for their children and they thought they did a good job. Parent 31 was clear that he considered himself a good parent:

I think I am a good parent compared with most men ... I love my kids to bits. I have spent all my time with kids, I don't drink or anything like that, I don't go out ...

He also expected to discuss his day, and the issues around bringing up the children with his partner. Parent 16, separated from the child's mother, also cared full-time for his son. He was involved in creating a fathers' network from the family centre and said he had something specific to offer the project:

Most nursery teachers are women and we do need to redress the balance. Not just for boys but for girls as well. In general taking the gender issues away for children. Certainly sometimes I feel like the Pied Piper and I think that's because not many men come down here. A lot of the children don't have access to a male ... you are a bit of a novelty. (16)

Generally, parents commented more on gender when shown the illustrations in Part C of the interviews (Chapter 9). Nonetheless it was already apparent that the parents thought basic care as the province of both mothers and fathers, whoever took on the main caring role in the home.

Main points

- The lack of preoccupation with basic care reflected the reasonable standards of living most families now experience.
- The absence of a focus on basic care did not imply it did not matter, but rather that good physical care was assumed. When basic physical basic care was mentioned, parents were at pains to be effective, consistent and responsive to the children's needs and views.
- Any child poorly fed, smelly, or physically uncared for in any other way, would have been seen as exceptional by all the participants, and the parents would probably be viewed by other parents as failing to meet their children's needs.
- A child-centred approach to parenting, offering choices for example about mealtimes, was universal in this sample.
- Parents saw basic care as part of the relationship with their child, not as routine.
- Patterns of basic care have become flexible, child responsive, and more relaxed than in the parents' own childhoods.
- In this sample the bulk of basic care was still undertaken by women.

This chapter now turns to the next topic, ensuring safety, where the parents expressed various concerns and were much less confident.

Ensuring safety

The Assessment Framework defines ensuring safety as:

Ensuring the child is adequately protected from harm or danger. Includes protection from significant harm or danger, and from contact with unsafe adults/other children and from self-harm. Recognition of hazards and danger both in the home and elsewhere.

This topic was not introduced by the parents in the early part of the interviews, but the question about their anxieties about parenting in the twenty-first century led to several aspects of ensuring safety being raised. The anticipated focus on protecting children from accidents in the home, or perhaps childhood illnesses, was hardly mentioned. However one parent living with relatives said she was concerned about:

Accidents and stuff, having the oven on and leaving the doors open, or pulling a knife off the work top, or leaving the door open and going in the road, or plugs with the little one crawling. Even at night with the doors closed I watch them, they can get their fingers in drawers or pull the telly off. (17)

It seemed that parents living in their own homes assumed a level of child proofing to the physical environment, or felt in control of physical safety aspects, although another parent (32) mentioned the danger of toys on stairs, and another the need to keep gates opening on to the street closed. The focus of the majority of parents however was on wider, social, and external danger. Across the two samples there was concern about the following:

- capacity to protect from abuse (3 parents);
- fear of not being a good enough parent to protect your child (3 parents);
- being exposed to racism (4 parents);

- exposure to drugs (4 parents);
- worries about playing in the street and traffic (4 parents);
- worries about the danger from strangers (5 parents);
- concerns about children's education and school (5 parents);
- worries about future opportunities in life (5 parents);
- children being bullied (6 parents);
- concerns that children were exposed too much to the seedy side of life, either directly, or through the television and that as a parent you might lose control (8 parents).

One parent mentioned the risk of unplanned pregnancy, and this was a grandmother. No one mentioned under age sexual activity. One person was concerned about food additives, and two parents mentioned concerns about global issues.

Of the three parents who talked about protecting the children in the home, two had several very small children, and the other was living temporarily with relatives and was aware that the house was not arranged with small children in mind. Of the three parents concerned that their children might be abused, two had experienced abuse in their own childhood and a third was particularly concerned in case her husband's *alcoholic family* abused her children. Those instances apart, the majority of parents were confident about keeping their children safe when they were in their own homes, but there was fairly universal anxiety about the way society was changing, and the dangers children might be exposed to by strangers or poor societal environments. These concerns are discussed under the headings:

- Dangerous environments.
- Losing a child.
- Schools, jobs and bullying.
- Racial abuse.

Dangerous environments

For the first sample much of their concern, apart from the danger from road traffic was hypothetical. Although even this relatively secure group worried about strangers. Parent 4 summed up some of the concerns about a changing world and said:

I think safety is a big issue, more than it needs to be. Walking to school and that sort of thing ... it means explaining about other people and that it's a sad fact of life that you can't be friendly with everybody and that there are certain adults and older people you mustn't speak to ... one of my biggest concerns is getting the balance between keeping the children away from the seedy side of life, the unpleasant, the scary, the unsuitable, whilst not wanting them to be too innocent, and to give them the right experiences for the future without being either overprotective or letting them get into difficulties. I do worry about the environment and overpopulation ...

And parent 15 in the second sample agreed about:

Some of the things at school like bullying and the violent things in the world that you can't always protect your children from ...

There was also consideration of what might be done. One parent (9) concerned about the school environment said she would move house to get a better school. Another (1) had already decided to educate one child privately. By contrast some of the parents, for example 32 and 33 in sample 2, had much less choice about schools or housing, were concerned about a paedophiles living in the local community, and generally had more direct experience of actual dangerous environments:

When we come out of the play centre, there's all these needles and stuff and they've got all these things ... and vehicles come on the park and there's drugs on the park. (32)

Losing a child

Five parents (14, 26, 27, 32, 33) were actively concerned in case a child might wander off or be snatched away if they weren't very vigilant. Parent 14 expressed this the most strongly:

Society gives me the biggest scare. I don't know who is lurking behind my garden fence. I don't know who is lurking in Tesco's or Homebase. And it's a potential threat. Me and my husband have discussed this at length and we find that very threatening. And especially every day in the paper another child has gone missing, and it's not just big kids it's little ones. James Bulger springs to mind doesn't he? And that is quite scary.

Again for parents 32 and 33 this was felt as an immediate threat:

They could just pick your kid up and go ... they've already had a bloke, he's bent, he tried to get 11 year old from school and down our street as well ...

For one or two of the parents it appeared that media stories and moral panic were influencing their views on danger, but the conclusion couldn't be avoided that the predominant view in both samples was that changes in the social order and local environments raised their anxieties about their abilities keep children safe, because these larger social and environmental factors were beyond their control.

Schools, jobs and bullying

As already indicated, parents had general concerns about society, and in particular what education or job opportunities there might be in the future. There was concern that children might not be safe in the school environments. Some expressed a general wish that children might be happy, enjoy their childhood at school, and have reasonable job opportunities in life.

This is summed up for sample 1 by parent 10:

I think a lot of it is the things that can go wrong these days, the drugs and things; there is so much of it about. You can only tell your children what can go wrong but you can't actually stop them. That's quite frightening that you are in control of their lives, that they will do what they want whatever you say. I suppose it is just wondering how they are going to turn out and that they will get a reasonable job that they are happy with and have a reasonable family life whatever that may be for them. But you can't actually do anything about it and you've just got to hope for the best. As they get older you lose control.

For sample two this is summed up by four parents (21, 22, 23, 24,) who said they wanted their children to: *have confidence; get into a good school; not be bullied; learn new things.* Most parents hoped their children would have better opportunities than they had but some were more confident about achieving that than others. For parents from ethnic minority groups bullying was also linked to the possibility of their children experiencing abuse based on racism.

Racial abuse

Sample 2 showed greater lived awareness of cultural issues. Mostly this was expressed positively, apart from two parents (32, 33) who were clearly not comfortable with the Asian families in their community. Some of this greater awareness is probably attributable to the proactive environments in family support projects on issues of race, religion and culture. However it was also the case that the ethnic minority parents in sample 2 spoke from personal experience of racial abuse or bullying on the grounds of colour, and had realistic concerns for their own children. Parents 26 and 27 spoke from both childhood and current experiences:

Yeah, I couldn't tell my mum that I was being bullied because she used to hold me by the head and turn me around and push me out the door and say go and sort it

out. There was, I learnt how to fight from a very early age. Being the only black child in an all white school was even worse because they all they had a field day ... Now with my son if he comes home and tells me he's being bullied he has 2 options. Either he can run like the wind or he can tell his teachers what's going on. For me if it happens once, twice, the third time I'm going into the school to go and raise the roof because that will not happen to my child. (26)

The black and Asian parents in the sample were concerned that their children might meet discrimination, abuse and bullying based on race. Parent 29, a mother of a mixed race child, was worried about identity, religion, and his school experiences, possibly bullying. Although parent 28, a mother of 4 children, and who hoped to maintain a Muslim identity, said that:

We are hoping everything will be alright, we have some confidence ...

She was one of only 2 parents who didn't express any anxieties at all about bringing up her children. The other confident parent (9) also spoke from a strong religious perspective, in her case Christian:

I don't really have any great worries. At the moment she's in a fortunate situation being born in a developed country ... we're not rich and not dependent on a second income ... she doesn't want for anything clothing and food wise ... I think we are in a fortunate position and we don't really have any worries at the minute.

Main points

- Most parents felt confident about keeping children physically safe in their own care.

- Two parents, who had experienced abuse, worried about their own psychological capacity to keep their children safe, and worried their children might also be abused.
- Most parents had concerns about society, the dangers to children outside the home, and their exposure to new dangers, especially from drugs, traffic and strangers. In sample 1 this was largely at a theoretical level. For families in disadvantaged environments it was a more pressing reality.
- Concerns about education and bullying in school were prevalent, including racism for the ethnic minority parents.

When it came to the next dimension, emotional warmth, everyone felt on much safer territory.

Emotional warmth

The Assessment Framework defines emotional warmth as:

Ensuring the child's emotional needs are met and giving the child a sense of being specially valued and a positive sense of their own racial and cultural identity. Includes ensuring the child's requirements for secure, stable and affectionate relationships with significant adults, with appropriate sensitivity and responsiveness to the child's needs. Appropriate physical contact, comfort and cuddling sufficient to demonstrate warm regard, praise and encouragement.

Emotional warmth is perhaps a slippery slope for practitioners who assess parental capacity, because some of the parents who maltreat and neglect children can also be observed behaving affectionately or warmly towards them. Emotional warmth therefore needs to be understood as something more profound than assumed warm feelings, and includes a range of emotionally responsive characteristics and styles which enable children to feel valued, as parents consistently respond positively to the child's needs. In thinking about other parents they

admired, most of the participants in the study prioritised qualities relating to emotional warmth and emotional security.

Their views on the emotional qualities relating to being good parents embraced a range of aspects adding breadth to the Assessment Framework definition. They were aware of the need to love and cuddle and praise, as evidenced by what is presented later about the place of reading with children, but when asked to describe people who were good parents, the responses concerned providing emotional security, creating relatedness, sensitivity and responsiveness. Child-centred attitudes and values, and warm intentions towards children, were combined with providing boundaries and firmness.

None of the parents had a shallow view of emotional warmth as just nice feelings towards a child. The data revealed views that were much more subtle about respect and regard, usually articulated as putting the child first and listening to their views and feelings. Some key related themes emerged from the data about emotional responsiveness and regard, which can be grouped. The parents' responses were nuanced. They linked words and ideas. Therefore their views are presented under headings drawn from the clusters of words used in the parents' narratives. Words utilised the most were identified, and then grouped following the connections made by the parents and are discussed under the headings:

- Loving, caring and understanding.
- Listening, accepting, attentive, negotiating, explaining.
- Treating children as individuals, putting them first, child-centredness.
- Firmness, fairness and fun.
- Calmness, patience, relaxed, thoughtful, reflective.

These are now discussed in turn.

Loving, caring and understanding

Parents 4, 7, 9, 13, 16, 19, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31

Loving and caring was fundamental for many of the parents, and proportionately more articulated in sample 2. However, where a parent mentioned the word caring or love, they usually associated it with another quality. Loving was expressed in tandem other concepts, for example, seeing the child as an individual (4) or using love to foster a sense of security (7). One father (16) also took a holistic view, saying that:

... a good parent is understanding, listens to a child, treats a child as an individual, offers love, support and understanding and fair discipline.

Another parent (23) linked *patience, love, caring, listening*, and another (31) whose own childhood experiences and current circumstances were tough said:

I love kids but that doesn't mean you are a good parent. I think you have to get down there to their level and play, do things that they want to do, not what you think they want to do.

Thus many parents thought loving, caring and understanding children's needs were important, but linked those qualities to actions and to other emotional qualities that they thought good parents needed. Some parents mentioned other kinds of clusters of emotional qualities:

Listening, accepting, attentive, negotiating, explaining

Parents 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 14, 16, 17, 21, 24, 28, 29, 31

Several parents, proportionately slightly more from sample 1, identified listening, accepting and attentiveness as not just giving time, although this was also seen as important, but also as paying attention to what children were saying, accepting what children said, and listening to their views. Verbal interaction for building relationships and explaining ranked high with some

parents. In various ways talking, listening and not judging, was important for all these thirteen parents. For example one parent said, of parents she admired that:

They listen to their children and actually find out what they want, that they actually sit and down listen to them. And that they listen to their point of view and see the child's needs as against what you want them to do. (17)

Parents with several small children felt that being attentive to everyone's needs was quite challenging. A parent, who had four small children, commented that it was hard because:

They all want attention and you can't give it to them, not everybody can have it and that's difficult. They can't all have equal attention and that's difficult sometimes. It's all right when they all want to do the same thing at once - that is easier. (28)

Listening and not judging, and paying attention was associated strongly with a style of parenting that was about explanation and negotiation, and was particularly strong when parents were teachers, doctors, or had other professional identities reliant on verbal skills.

Parent 3, a part-time GP, said of some people she thought were good parents that:

They explain everything to their children in a way that the children really understand why things are done and not done, so that they can go easy without it mattering.

The kind of parenting that listens to children, pays attention, negotiates and explains is central to these parents' notions of emotional warmth. This process enabled the parents to mediate between what they experienced as children and what they aimed for, a child-centred model of parent-child interaction. The emotional warmth aspect of parenting therefore was also tinged

with mutual respect and discussion. Love was not just physical expression, it was emotionally responsive. Some parents however focused less on the parent's skills and more on the child-centredness of this kind of approach.

Treating children as individuals, putting them first, child-centredness

Parents 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 17, 31

The articulation of this aspect was proportionately stronger in sample 1, which may indicate this was a preoccupation of those parents. However, the most striking thing about all the research participants, across the samples, was the overall level of child-centredness, and respect for children, that permeated the majority of the interviews. Parents aimed to put children first, for example through listening to their needs or having fun. While some parents mentioned making time for themselves and their relationships, this was never at the expense of giving time to children or putting the family first. However some parents articulated the concept of individual child-centredness more strongly than the others. Parent 4 expressed this as:

Each child is given its opportunity as far as it is humanly possible, each has been given opportunities to reach their full potential and the children are particularly different children.

Parent 7 thought child-centredness the most important quality and parent 8 thought *going at a child's pace* was good. The parents who had chosen not to work in favour of full-time parenting, at times articulated a total commitment to the child. Parent 11 thought it necessary to be there all the time and not to do housework until children were in bed, and thought that on social occasions where children were present they should come first. She said:

I give my children one hundred per cent and I feel that's what every parent should do.

Parent 14 said she did not want to be *a parent with 200 other things to do* and that *motherhood is a job and not an easy job*. She also felt that the role of committed mother was undervalued saying she thought that:

People and the attitude of society when you say you are a housewife and mother, they look down their noses ... these big business women, if they spent the time to do the whole time, a day or even a week, they would have a different attitude to being a mother.

Again, as a parent professionally qualified as a nursery nurse and personally committed to child care, she stated:

Being a mother is one of the most rewarding jobs I've ever had. (14)

The parents' responses reveal degrees of child-centredness, ranging from describing the creation of opportunity to a commitment to a one hundred per cent involvement across the board, which view was concentrated in some of those parents who had consciously decided not to work outside the home to focus on children full-time (4, 8, 11, 14). Although other parents such as parent 30, whose circumstances gave her little choice but to be a full-time parent, also articulated the aspiration to respond to children's expressed needs:

I will try to give the kids a life they want, and not the life I had. My chaotic life was being abused and stuff ... so you try to give them the love and care and I like to take them out on holidays and that. (30)

Child-centredness, putting children first is expressed as an aspiration in a range of ways, but most clearly by those who described themselves as having the job of parenting and to a lesser degree by those who through economic circumstances found themselves doing it.

Firmness, fairness and fun

Parents 2, 6, 10, 12, 14, 16, 27, 29

This aspect of emotional warmth was clearly expressed as a priority by a cluster of parents, and balanced between samples 1 and 2. There was a clear sense of taking pleasure in the children.

One parent immediately identified this as the key quality of some parents she admired:

They know how to have fun with children without being patronising ... they have good discipline with them without it being too authoritarian and love them, they have a good laugh and are easy to get on with. I can't think of anything else. (6)

Again fun was not seen in isolation but linked to other qualities such as *responsiveness* (6), *respect* (6), *holidays and relaxation* (10), *being a brilliant laugh* is linked to *relaxation* by parent 12 and *humour* to *relatedness* by 14. It is a measure of the parents' all round approach to emotional qualities that they were always linking qualities, for example *pleasure and quality time* (27) and articulating the way fun, fairness, discipline and boundaries could be two sides of the same coin, while also linked to relaxation and good times together. Another parent came up with group of qualities around the theme of fun and fairness:

I've always admired the way she is fair with them, fun with them, takes them seriously, has high expectations of them and they've always responded very well to her. She's also very good with other children, lots of patience with them, which I've not always had. (2)

Fun, fairness and patience were valued by other parents. Sometimes discipline and authority were linked with fun and fairness. It was likely that the children were largely unaware of the extent to some authority was exerted. This seems important when considering positive parenting. It is in marked contrast with the kind of heavy handed authority often experienced by maltreated children. Another emotional quality which was frequently mentioned by the

parents was calmness, often identified in a sentence which would also contain the words patience and relaxation. Parents valued qualities in other parents which enabled them to remain still, and to provide a calmness on which children could rely. This was viewed as a quality which enabled children to feel secure and to express their own emotions, and is discussed next.

Calmness, patience, relaxed, thoughtful, reflective

Parents 1, 2, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 23, 28

Calmness, and not panicking, emerged as qualities parents valued, as expressed in their accounts. This was proportionately more evident in sample 1 and could perhaps, although there is no direct evidence for this, reflect the influence of Gina Ford (2001). Calmness was coupled with other virtues such as thoughtfulness and reflection (1, 10, 14, 16). Other links were made to patience (2), flexibility (4), sensible and reflective parenting (10), commitment (11), relaxation and reasoning (14), and listening (16). Calmness has strong associations with the cognitive side of parenting and an ability to stand back and reflect on processes between parents and children. One parent articulated this as linked to care for others and community:

They are calm and very thoughtful, and they think of other people and they pass that on to their children as well, they are involved and the children see themselves as part of the community, they don't panic whatever happens they deal with it and that's fine. (1)

Parent 16 had worked at taking a different approach from his father and said:

I try and do everything differently. I am calm and I listen. I treat him (his son) as an individual and I'm patient and I make every effort to be understanding. I think I can honestly say that at no time am I like my parents. I don't think I had a particularly good upbringing ... I go out of my way not to do anything like they did... ruled with a rod of iron to the point of fear.

Offering this kind of reasoned, reflective, emotional security and sensitivity was high on most parents' agendas, explicitly and implicitly, and there was a diversity of means of expression. Giving time was also linked to the calmness of parental attention and emotional stability (3, 8, 13, 23, 28). The majority of parents' views on the kind of emotional warmth that they admired and tried to achieve showed that they had a thoughtful understanding of the relationship between showing love, keeping calm, having fun, and providing emotional security and stability on which children could rely. Most of the parents had received sufficient emotional warmth as children to have the inner capacity to provide what they aspired to, often simply by acting spontaneously. However for a minority of parents this was going to be harder work, as the next section shows.

Emotional absences and negatives

Nine parents in sample 2, for example parent 16 who had a history of drug abuse and crime, counselling and rehabilitation, were working hard against their own experience of maltreatment and their own feelings about it, and with support were by their own accounts achieving what they were aiming for:

I've been to prison twice, I took drugs, I used to drink, I used to smoke. I decided in two weeks to give up everything. My dad did all those things and it gave him all his problems. I've found that by not doing it it's made me an A1 parent because of my background unemployment has meant I've had to dedicate to my son ... I have been fortunate in a way ... a lot of people who are employed are time poor. (16)

Other parents expressed how being emotionally positive was an aspiration for them:

I will try and give my kids a life they want, not the life I had ... I have never done things like we had ... abuse ... (18)

You try and do the positives but the negatives are still there, you are holding back on negatives, and while you are trying to do that the positives are passing you by. (30)

Another compensated his son for his own past:

My mum had to work constantly, she didn't spend much time with us ... but me, I have spoiled my eldest rotten, I spoil him rotten ... (31)

Two particular themes appeared from this sub-group of parents. One was the theme of poor childhood experiences, for example:

I've never known what a good parent was. (20)

There was four of us and we didn't have individual attention ... I was in foster care all my life ... it was horrible. (21)

When we was kids my mum and dad worked full time, my sister dragged us up. (23)

The second was the resolve to be a better parent for their own children:

I'm trying to give my kids the life they want not the life I had. (30)

I was totally neglected ... I wouldn't let mine go their own way. (32)

Everything that was done to me I wouldn't dream of doing. (33)

Some of these parents, who had experienced bleak and harmful childhoods, could identify what was emotionally harmful and start to think about what might be better, but it has to be said

that it was sometimes within a very limited range. In other words they knew what not to do, but could not always describe positive things to do. Emotional warmth was sometimes defined in terms of not doing harm rather than positively creating warmth and there was a clear awareness of the difficulties of making this particular parenting journey. As one of the more socially disadvantaged parents, who was beginning to turn her life around, put it:

Experiences, it all comes down to how you were with your parents ... you try and build on the good experiences you had ... my mum died when I was 11, my own family broke up ... it doesn't matter what road you are on in life, the negatives are always there and you try to twist them into something positive ... it's the way that you see to bring up your own children. (18)

This leads to a brief reflection on the importance of positive family experiences for creating the capacity for emotional warmth, and the of role family support and social and community support, for those whose parenting journey is more difficult to make. These two themes are discussed here because they connect to emotional warmth, which has emerged so strongly as important. They are considered under the headings:

- The importance of role models and emotional support.
- Being helped to parent.

The importance of role models and emotional support

Role models are important for individual growth and development, and parents are the first role model for the developing child. This is where there was a marked contrast between the majority of parents and the sub-group of parents whose childhood had negative elements. Sample 1 all spoke from positive emotional ties with kin and community. Many had very happy memories of childhood, and had simply internalised them to pass on:

There were two of us, we had a happy upbringing and things ... my father is a lot older than my mother, we were out in the country. He was a country clergyman, idyllic in a way, and we had quite a lot of freedom and things and they were quite good at letting us go and not holding us back ... I would like to be like them. (1)

My parents were good parents in lots of ways. My parents spent lots of time with us to run us round lots of places. My mum gave up work to look after us, I have done similar. (8)

Bringing my own children up, I appreciate all the things my parents did for me and my sister and want to be able to do the same. I was very lucky and you don't appreciate it at the time ... they did their best for us. (9)

For parent 1, following role models came fairly naturally, and for parents 8 and 9, family support is simply there if required:

My first call would be my mum. She's had three of us and she doesn't get in a flap over things, I would talk to her first and then friends. (8)

We've got good support networks, friends who are close and I've got a sister with two children and there's mum and dad and other relatives. (9)

Most of sample 1, and parent 29 (one of the workers in family support project 4), could choose from a range of friends and family, both as role models, support, or sounding boards, either at a distance or locally. They needed little help with being a parent, but if they wanted to talk with someone they could identify a friend or family member who could be approached. Parent 10, for example, had an extensive and supportive network of relatives locally, so although widowed she had support to carry on parenting. It was noticeable that where parents were well educated

and professionally qualified, they were drawing from their professional as well as personal resources to outline the emotional capacities that they thought made for good parenting. They also identified that if they needed specific professional advice they approach teachers (4, 11) or health professionals (5, 8, 9).

For some parents in sample 2, the wider family was sometimes not available or supportive. The reasons for attending a family support project were diverse. For three parents (12, 13, 14) the main reason was social isolation, their families were geographically distant and the family centre staff and other parents were seen as valuable advisors if needed. For parents 15 to 33 more complex reasons came into play for the need for support with parenting. Parents 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19 were drawing emotional support from the family support project for personal reasons such as depression, previous or current domestic abuse. Parents 20, 21, 22, 23, and 24 were using a drop in centre to enrich their children's play, because of a lack of social contacts and limited community resources and opportunities. Parents 26, 27 and 29 were using a project for family support because it specialised in ethnic minority support and because of an identified need for support with parenting. Parents 30, 31, 32, 33 were also engaged with a family support project for reasons of personal and social disadvantage.

When asked about where they would seek help, parents as role models were not high on the agenda, although like sample 1, some parents (17, 20, 21, 22) would seek out health visitors or teachers for specific queries. There was clear appreciation of what was offered by the support project activities for parents and children. It was apparent that all the 22 parents, including those with the more difficult childhoods could derive a level support from the projects:

I would come here; I don't think my husband's family understand. There are different ways of bringing children up ... the crèche workers are really nice and they are an outside person as well. (12)

The centre is very good, I've had to be tough but I am softening up. (16)

We come to this group to get the children out of the way for a while and then to have quality time for a couple of hours. (25, 26, 27)

The one person I talk to about kids and it's rare is R (project worker) I like R. I get on with him. Sometimes I have trouble explaining myself, but another male ... (31)

If they can't help you, like you know your family could, then they know some-one who can. Even though there's support here you can still feel very lonely because you know they go home to their families and you've got to get on with your life and it is very hard. What I don't like is when they do that ... they've got a good family and they don't appreciate it; they don't know how bad it is. (33)

Being helped to parent

It helps to experience emotional security and a sense of relatedness in order to be a parent who can offer emotional warmth to children. The extent to which the projects and some of the project staff were providing this towards the parents and children was striking. Their personal availability and warmth had earned them respect from parents who otherwise would have been very wary about any self disclosure:

I wouldn't talk no, not to my mum, it's very rare I talk about the kids, there is one person I do talk to, it's rare, it's R. (the project leader), I do talk to R I like him. I get on with R. Sometimes I have trouble explaining myself ... but another male ... but it is so good R is there, you, can chat with him ... I wouldn't copy my family ... one cares more about his drink. (31)

It was also clear that most parents preferred to parent their own way, your children are after all a reflection on the self. Jacqueline Kennedy is reported as saying:

If you bungle raising your children, I don't think whatever else you do matters much.

(Rodham Clinton, 2003: 237)

For some parents, easy identification with wider family meant they were happily following parenting styles learned in their own families, supplemented by ideas from new friends and family. Those parents using family support projects valued the opportunities to meet other parents, the play opportunities for children, the support and advice, staff and parenting groups and classes. They were often looking for new models and ways of doing things, but were sensitive about it.

In both samples there was some evidence of the use of parenting books and magazines, for example Penelope Leach (parent 5), the Internet and Practical Parenting (parent 16). For all 33 parents, looking after their children and the emotional component was a personal subject. Giving or receiving help was a sensitive area for parents who were reluctant for others to intervene in their relationships with their children. For example parent 14 said:

I am a bit of a stubborn old thing about advice ... I don't hold much for health visitors, it's the advice they give everybody, its blanket stuff, its books stuff. To me he (her child) is an individual blueprint of a person ... they can't tell me how to bring him up, so I tend not to listen to a lot of it. I do my own research from books.

Parent 7 expressed something that others implied:

Even if a doctor tells me this is wrong, I will have to find out myself, I will do my own research.

This autonomy about advice is discussed in a group at family support project 4 where a worker and two parents were interviewed together. The project worker said:

I ask friends for advice about my children more than my family. I think. I mean my mum and dad is still there and would have advice. But I have great difficulty about going to them and it's that sense of having to admit that I don't know something. It's always been quite hard about actually saying I don't know what I am doing here. So I don't like to admit to them that I'm stuck and I'm struggling. I'll go to my friends and ask them. And my sister as well, I have an older sister who's very ready to give an opinion. At times, and it's rare, very rare, I'd go to her and say Can you help? Because that would give her one over on me and I don't want to give her that satisfaction. But with my friends it's different because I feel we are very much in the same boat, we are going through the same things at the same time and my friends would tend to have children of a similar age and we're all at the same stage at the same time. So they are very important. I think for that you know when I am stuck. (25)

Parent 26 agreed that friends (but not social workers) are the most helpful:

My parents I wouldn't ask them for any advice on bringing up kids I tell you. I told them the things you did to me are that cruel you could have been locked up. That were their way and I can see that – it was their way I'm doing it my way, and my way which is within the law. At the end of the day, there are still some ground rules that they've got their say with us.

Parent 25's insight into the kind of issues that can occur between parents and grown up children, and her rivalry with her sister, has implications for social workers who assume that involving extended kin when families are struggling is necessarily a good thing.

Equally, Parent 26 and Parent 27 would have had difficulties in accepting help from their extended kin, feeling that they would be judged on the way they brought up children. Both Parent 26 and Parent 27 found social workers unhelpful and did not make a connection between Parent 25's social work qualification and her support role at the project. In particular they made a distinction between instrumental child protection activity and the value of family support projects:

Parent 26: *If you phone up a social worker and I go and say I'm having problems with my child, immediately they start now getting out their little black pen and be writing and writing and writing. When they have finished all that then they are now scrutinising you and putting you under a microscope and saying now what is this women doing, no, no, no, no. Yet at the end of the day you are the one that have gone to them for help and they turn round and make you out as a very bad women. Oh no.*

Parent 27: *I wouldn't associate with social workers.*

Parent 26: *Yes, they make you feel bad.*

Parent 25: *But we're social workers.*

Parent 27: *No, you people are the family support project.*

Parent 25: *That's different for you is it?*

Parent 26: *You're dealing with children, you know what I mean.*

Parent 27: *I came to the project under different circumstances with my children. We fled domestic violence and the boys had come here for counselling and so in them being counselled, the people that are now involved like P and A they now know ME not as this child's mother who is giving problems, but as myself, where I'm coming from, who I am, the problems that I've had. There's now a personal interaction with them, see.*

Parent 25: *That makes that difference now.*

Parent 27: *Now a social worker who doesn't know you from anyways has no idea and then suddenly they want to start scratching and scratching and saying you're doing this wrong. And this is wrong and this is wrong. Whereas you guys, you say 'why don't you try this or why don't you try that'*

Parent 26: *It's totally different.*

Parent 25: *It's a different approach.*

This exchange shows the importance of relatedness in giving and taking help as well as the way that social workers can be perceived. It is also a strong illustration of the way that a family support approach to working with parents builds trust and confidence.

Parent 25 did say afterwards that the interview had given her cause to think about her own role were current child abuse to be disclosed in the project, as she had thought that they were clear that they would take action in terms of referral to other social work agencies.

Main points

- Emotional warmth was a very important topic for the parents and together the 33 participants provided a varied and nuanced account of what the emotional capacities of parenting are.
- Emotional warmth was described in ways which extended it beyond warm feelings to providing stability, responsiveness and creating a climate of emotional security and caring understanding (regard) which is child-centred and calm.
- Promoting positive racial identity was a topic raised by the ethnic minority parents under ensuring safety not emotional warmth because of concern about racial abuse, although these parents were also concerned to build their child's confidence in this area.

- Childhood experiences of emotional warmth or lack of it impacted one way or another on the participants' parenting abilities and capacity for emotional responsiveness.
- Family histories, community support, friendships with other parents, were all part of the emotional warmth a growing child might experience.
- Emotional relationships with their children were personal, parents were sensitive about help and how it was offered.
- Fun and humour were a large component of emotional warmth for many parents.

Summary

Basic care to a reasonable standard was assumed necessary by all the parents irrespective of social position and failure to provide physical care in a contemporary context would be significant maltreatment. The parents all interacted positively with children at mealtimes, bath times and in general care. The absence of this positive interaction when giving basic care might be a concern. Fathers were increasingly routinely included in aspects of basic care, but economic circumstances still lead to the main carer more usually being the mother. However the involvement of the parent who was not the main carer mattered to all the respondents, unless there was a dispute or absent partner. Most children could expect an active interest in all aspects of their upbringing from two parents.

Ensuring safety was a concern of all the parents, especially danger from outside the home and the wider environment. Some parents had less opportunity to change their circumstances, for example schools or housing, and this highlights the need for intervention into poor environments to improve opportunities for some families. Overall parents were most concerned about those aspects of ensuring safety outside their control, particularly those in the immediate environment which impacted on their children. However some parents had positive community links and could move schools or houses, other parents expected to have to deal with the issues (poor schools, bullies, racism, drugs) in situ. This finding supports those

commentators on the Assessment Framework who argue that not enough attention has been paid to redressing needs in the environments where children grow up. The most worrying safety issues were community and wider environmental threats and for some parents this was very immediate. For those without the economic means to move from or change environments, attention to improving their local situation was particularly important.

Emotional warmth was the area which has drew a complex and enriching response from all the parents, and the current phrasing of the Assessment Framework definition may be inadequate, in not capturing sufficiently the emotional characteristics that make for a stable, consistent emotionally complex, climate between parent and child. The parents' abilities to think holistically about children meant that they made creative links, for example between fun and fairness. There is little attention to teaching parents the skills of fun and fairness in social work literature, yet humour is well known to defuse tense situations and was identified by Freud as the 'healthy' defensive mechanism that people use to handle stress. Work such as that of the *Leicester Centre for Fun and Families* (Neville et al., 1996, 1998) has identified a critical aspect of relationship building between parents and children, which could be utilised more often

Emotional stability (calmness) was also very important to the parents. Emotional calmness was linked to the effort to think about what you are doing as a parent, and can be learned and developed. Several parents were looking to family support projects to help with this and to guide in other ways. Emotional capacity can be impaired when you haven't experienced emotional warmth from loving role models in childhood. Social workers and family support project workers could usefully work more with parents on the impact of their own family experiences (not history) on their own parenting. However, help is best provided through giving parents a range of ideas and examples of things they might do as parents, coupled with sensitive availability. This supportive and relationship based approach handles the fact that a parent's own self identity and their parenting are closely linked, and in some instances fragile.

This chapter has presented and discussed the parents' views on three dimensions of Parenting Capacity as articulated in the Assessment Framework. The parents' views show: how parenting changes over time; how articulate and concerned all parents can be about what they offer to their children; how help if it is to be received has to be offered sensitively and appropriately and the value of family support projects supporting isolated and disadvantaged parents.

The next chapter considers the parents' views on stimulation, guidance and boundaries and stability. After this, Chapters 8 and 9 will turn to the ways in which the parents' experiences of reading with children, and looking at picture books, can add to an understanding of the six dimensions and also offer ways of enhancing parenting capacity in these six key areas.

Chapter 7

Stimulation, guidance and boundaries and stability: parents' views.

Introduction

This chapter introduces the parents' views on the parenting tasks identified in the Assessment Framework as stimulation, guidance and boundaries and stability. The last chapter showed that the majority of the parents were not simplistic in their conceptualisation of the tasks of basic care, ensuring safety, and emotional warmth. The understanding of parenting was often expressed in holistic and multidimensional ways.

A similar in the round view emerges in this chapter in relation to guidance and boundaries. All the parents were moving on from the remnants of Victorian and post World War 2 ideas about discipline, the word they most commonly use, to describe different approaches. This is particularly clear when they mentioned physical chastisement, and there was no vestige of hankering for older values. The aspirational culture of not smacking that is now more widely, if not wholly, accepted had been adopted by almost every parent, including those who were still prepared to smack lightly very occasionally or as a last resort. This is in contrast with the findings of Smith (1995) and will be discussed further.

Stimulation, guidance and boundaries and stability have been touched on indirectly when discussing basic care, ensuring safety, emotional warmth, child-centredness and relatedness. It has also been noted that a parent's own family history can impact on his or her parenting capacity. It was therefore to be expected that the three topics in this chapter would shed light indirectly on other parenting capacities, and that both family history and family support would remain significant. The first dimension to be discussed is stimulation and, while all parents seemed to want to provide stimulating opportunities for

their children it is an area where differences in the quality and complexity of what was provided varied more between parents from different social groupings and environments.

Stimulation

The Assessment Framework defines stimulation as:

Promoting child's learning and intellectual development through encouragement and cognitive stimulation and promoting social opportunities. Includes facilitating the child's cognitive development and potential through interaction, communication, talking and responding to the child's language and questions, encouraging and joining the child's play, and promoting educational opportunities. Enabling the child to experience success and ensuring school attendance or equivalent opportunity. Facilitating child to meet challenges of life.

When parents were recruited to participate in the study they were asked to be prepared to talk about parenting and reading with children. As parents were asked about reading, it emerged that everyone in the sample, including a parent who could not read herself, was indeed using books with their children. This included both reading with them and encouraging children to read for themselves. Therefore, much of what the parents said about stimulating their children to learn and develop intellectually is discussed in the next chapter, where it can be seen that reading with children remains a primary way to interact and communicate. The parents described a range of benefits of reading with children which belong in Chapter 8. This chapter considers other aspects of stimulation which the parents thought important under the headings:

- Spending time to join in the child's play and experiencing success.
- Ensuring school attendance and facilitating other experiences.
- Helping children to meet the challenges of life.

Spending time to join in the child's play and experiencing success

Spending time with children was a preoccupation of the majority of parents, and associated with activities which would stimulate children, enrich their experience, and make them feel successful. Some talked of *spending time* and others introduced the notion of *quality time*, another relatively modern parenting notion. There were examples of this kind of thinking from 19 of the parents across the whole sample:

I spend more time with them and put value on what we call the quality time aspect. (2)

A lot of time for the children, giving them lots of opportunities to do things and see things. (3)

We always have time for each other and quality time. (4)

Time to play and quality time spent together. (6)

My parents spent a lot of time with us and I hope to do the same. (8)

Time with wider family. (10)

Being there all day and taking them to clubs. (12)

We spend little bits of time together, and I try to give quality time, my complete attention ... on firework night we spent an hour looking out of the window at fireworks. (13)

Its all down to time, isn't it. I have a lot of time for O and I make time. I don't work purposely so I have time, it's all time. (14)

Time with each individual one. (15)

I dedicate to my son ... we are trying to find dads who are time poor and financially poor to try and encourage them to do the full range of activities with children from reading to cooking and going to football. (16)

Giving a quiet minute and paying attention, playing and reading with them when they want to. (17)

I try for a quiet time each day. (18)

I give time on activities. (19)

Giving time and playing with the children to give them confidence.

(20, with 21, 22 agreeing)

Spend loads of time with the children. (23, 24)

Giving time was frequently mentioned, explicitly or implicitly, as desirable for stimulation and building the child's confidence (1, 9, 28, 29). Parents made efforts to give children as much time as possible and the mention of quality time occurred throughout the sample, tailing off in the latter part. However all the parents were, de facto, spending time with their children. Only one parent who worked full time was concerned about:

Not being there to spend time ... (7)

The issue of quality was not just a slogan, however, because while the majority assented to the need to give time, there were differences in the amount of time given and the range of activities undertaken. Some parents (23, 30, 33) were struggling to express positive ways of spending time, although they were with their children all day. Others expressed concern about finding enough time for their children, especially if they had three or four.

I've got three kids and it's hard enough to find time and for each individual. (26)

When giving time, parents were reading and talking with children, playing with them, or taking them to other stimulating activities, including days out. Parents mentioned the ways they spent time with children, and those who did not work outside the home were particularly vocal. This was summed up by parent 28, a full time mother of four:

I give them as much time and attention as possible, I can do it all myself because I've got nothing else to do, just the house and children. I don't need to go out to work. I can manage it. I can help them with their homework and read their books. I give as much time as possible, I do all sorts of activities with them, painting, reading, playing ... because that's what they like ... I try to really listen to what they say and understand.

And parent 17, a single parent living with relatives:

It's the bond that 5 minutes is for you and them. They've got playing out time but they've also got a special time ... I do all the housework first thing ... and then we sit down together.

Several parents with young children spoke of creating play activities at home, for example:

I've started putting little things to one side, little bags and things like that because I think it would be nice for her to do dressing up because we never did. (9)

Some of this was linked to an awareness of the educational advantages of good pre-school experiences:

I hope it helps him with his reading. We're learning recognition of colours. (8)

So, giving time to play and activities in the home was understood to stimulate the child's development and to prepare them for playgroup, school, and life generally.

Ensuring school attendance and facilitating other experiences

Enabling the child to experience success, ensuring school attendance or equivalent opportunity and facilitating other kinds of opportunities for growth and development is part of stimulation. All the parents expected the children to attend school and time spent in play was viewed, in part, as preparation for school. There were concerns about the quality of provision that might be available, and about what might happen within the school environment:

I am worried about the secondary school because that takes them out of what feels like a fairly cosy, safe environment, into the big school in the big town and all that means. I am already thinking how will they cope with that? (25)

Without exception, the parents using the family support projects were doing so to stimulate their children's growth and development and to give them new experiences, which would provide useful pre-school preparation, as much as to receive help and support for themselves:

We come here to this group like to get the children out of the house for a couple of hours and to give them quality time. (21)

The parents were also supplementing this activity at home. This was particularly important where external environments were poor. Attending a family support project was seen as a positive way of avoiding danger on the streets by interviewees at family support project 3. It was also seen as a way of helping children to be more autonomous and providing other stimulating play experiences:

It's a pretty good start for their life of leaving you; they come here to learn different things. They can do playdoh and paint and they have a choice of being in a big room or doing all these things. (22, with 23, 24 agreeing)

However there was little mention from the parents attending the support groups of participating in other activities beyond the centre or the school. By contrast, other parents, especially in the first sample, described their children taking part in a wider range of social and community activities. For this first sample of parents, keeping the children busy and occupied was a way of life, and a wider social and community and activity life was valued. This difference between the samples may be partly because there were more of the older children in the first sample, or perhaps an outcome of advantageous financial and social factors. Parents in sample 1 were providing a wider range of opportunities because they were easily able to:

We certainly spend more time doing things with the children, not just taking them places but at home, and playing games. We also support our children in what they do ... we go along with our kids when they do things and help them with their music practice. (3)

If you put enthusiasm into your children, they respond in the same way ... (5)

The parents valued being there to take children to clubs and activities, and as one parent said it was to build confidence:

I push mine to do more after school activities, Brownies, dancing and swimming lessons at an early age, I wanted her to gain a bit more confidence because she is shy. (9)

These children had few responsibilities, whereas occasionally an older child, for example a boy being brought up by a single parent in sample 2, took on adult responsibilities:

M (aged 10) knows how to get into my bank account to access my money ... which is a dangerous thing but at the end of the day if he has responsibility he knows if he takes the money and spends it there s nothing left ... there are times I can't get to the cash point and I need him to go and if I say £10 he must come back with £10. My son has more responsibility than most 10 year olds. (26)

Three of the poorer families had family outings in local parks. Another family went swimming, but for one family treats on such relatively inexpensive days out were simply out of the question:

When I take my children to the park, if she sees an ice cream van parked I just say don't even think about it, don't even think about it. (27)

Another factor was that some inner city and rural environments, community facilities were not very diverse. In some situations the whole community was struggling because of a lack of jobs, poor housing and antisocial behaviour in the area. One parent, living in the

most derelict area of all those in the sample, described the disadvantaged children in the community from whom she wished to keep her distance:

There was a family up the street and they was in bed and they've got a 2 year old, a four year old and a five year old and they had to get their own breakfast and get to school and the eldest got on the main road and was killed and that was because the mum couldn't be bothered to get up ... I couldn't do that not because I'm a good mother but because I am myself. (32)

Therefore where parents were at odds with parts of the community they lived in, and distrusted some other parents, the children's social activities and peer relationships became restricted. Or where there were few affordable organised activities they were left to wander the streets with the associated risks:

My kids (age 10 and 5 and 2) say they can't get lost, they say they know their names and addresses and can find a policeman ... I've had to say to her this policeman you find may not even be a policeman. What she needs is a shock ... she still goes off. She (age 5) doesn't think twice about going over the gate ... the others just go to their mates ... but she's off. (26)

Differences could also be seen in educational opportunity. For several parents education began with time spent in the home. Playing was seen as educational by some mothers, especially the professionally qualified ones:

We do shapes, colours, objects, alphabets. (8)

Well obviously, educationally because he's going to have to read when he goes to school, but also it is quality time spent together. Not just reading it together but

talking about it and laughing if funny things happen ... in Thomas the Tank Engine ... he also plays out the story where Henry gets stuck in a tunnel ... he's got a tunnel and sticks Henry inside. (6)

By contrast for another parent being able to provide some toys was an advance:

I have toys for them on the stairs and I get criticised, people say they can fall over them and that is my prerogative. I never had toys so I make sure my kids do. It is in the way but that's a small price to pay if the kids are happy. (33)

For another parent (30) just getting her children into school would be an achievement.

This was the focus and nothing further could be considered:

I didn't go to school, but they've got to and everything, they've got to learn. I can't say other things are important because I've only just got them into school.

Some parents were looking to enhance and supplement school provision themselves through play and activities. Other parents had more choices. In sample 1, a parent had chosen from a range of good state and private schools (1) and another was prepared to move house to get a better school (9). Other parents of small children regularly mixed with other parents to gain social stimulation for the children, and had helpful networks to draw on:

We go out a lot and we both enjoy it, seeing other people. (8)

We are lucky we live in a nice area and that sort of thing, we know 2 GPs, 2 pharmacists, teachers, and we know a health visitor on a friendly basis. (9)

Only time will tell whether the child sent to the cash machine becomes a self-made millionaire, while more protected children flounder in later life, but it seems reasonable to suggest that the provision of better opportunities is an advantage. It is probably also the case that lack of opportunities and adverse experience may mean a child does not achieve their potential. Living in an environment where your parents keep you away from other children because of perceived risk, or leave you to wander the area, is not as conducive to feeling confident or experiencing success as having a choice of activities with other children or a safe environment in which to meet and mix with other families both formally and informally. There were clear differences between the families in the range of community and educational activities depending on their personal and community circumstances. This also impacted on what the parents said about facilitating children to meet the challenges of life, and how they did so.

Helping children to meet the challenges of life

Some of the life experiences that children were facing were quite challenging in themselves, as described by 9 parents (18, 21, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 33). These parents had experienced adversity in their own childhood which, together with current social factors, could be judged to have had an impact on the children. Where there were pressures on parents, children's experiences of recreational and education stimulation were either diminished, or they could be heightened in ways that might be seen as dangerous, because of harmful environmental elements, the parent's need of help, or other events. For example:

He's not had a rough life, but some things haven't been good ... the police raided the house when he was a baby, about a year old, and he was just screaming ... and since then he has not really spoke ... we've been to the doctors ... (31)

This father thought these events had contributed to his son's aggressive behaviour towards other children which had created some difficulties, as when the child was in a group he bullied other children. The father was working hard to moderate his son's behaviour and prepare him for nursery school. He considered that the family support project helped him to do this. Other children of the parents in the sample were facing challenges such as their parent's low income, bullying at school and poor environments. At the same time, the parents' own experiences and opportunities were limiting what they could offer their children in the way of wider opportunities and stimulation. For example:

I used to wander off because my mum wouldn't let me go anywhere ... so I just used to go ... my kids I can tell them to go out for an hour or two and they come home. They haven't got a clue about time but they will come home ... (26)

There was a contrast between the more advantaged and less advantaged parents because the challenges of life were different and some social environments were safer. If the environment is safe then positive stimulation is more easily achieved. It is easier to extend children's experience into being part of society and there is more space to consider values and attitudes:

The children see themselves as part of the community. (1)

It's child-centredness making the child feel happy and loved, secure and ready to launch off into the world ... looking at the world from different angles, drawing pictures, opening up the imagination.(7)

I hope I shall, be able to and not be afraid to let go. (8)

Overall therefore, it became impossible to decouple the opportunities for stimulation outside the home from social contexts. The parents in sample 1 were able to access a range of provision in safety, while some of the parents in sample 2 could not for reasons of social deprivation. This raises two issues. First, the importance of the stimulation provided in the home, which includes play and reading. Second, it highlights the importance of improving some environments where families live, a theme which recurs.

Main points

- Parents identified reading as an important component in providing stimulation for children.
- Spending time with children mattered to all parents, but some children had more enriching times with parents than others.
- Social advantage/disadvantage determined the quality of children's educational and other opportunities for growth and development, and influenced the kind of challenges children faced.
- Safe communities enhanced the opportunities children had for stimulation.
- The family support projects were useful in offering safe and stimulating activities and experiences for children.

Reading or looking at books with children in the home is something any parent in any community can engage with to stimulate a child. It is not expensive to resource, especially where communities have libraries and family support centres. As such it is a straightforward means to significant levels of stimulation, and relevant to all strategies to enhance parenting capacity and children's development.

The next topic is guidance and boundaries, and here the parents were brought together across the sample by the strongest trend, which was to move away from physical punishments and criticism to find more positive ways of ensuring children were disciplined

and socialised. This topic preoccupied many parents, who often knew what they wanted to leave behind from their own childhoods, and had clear ideas of what they hoped to achieve.

Guidance and boundaries

The Assessment Framework defines guidance and boundaries as:

Enabling the child to regulate his or her own emotions and behaviour. The key parental tasks are demonstrating and modelling appropriate behaviour and control of emotions and interactions with others, and guidance which involves setting boundaries, so that the child is able to develop an internal model of moral values and conscience, and social behaviour appropriate for the society within which they will grow up. The aim is to enable children to grow into autonomous adults, holding their own values, and able to demonstrate appropriate behaviour with others rather than having to be dependent on rules outside themselves. This includes not over-protecting children from exploratory and learning experiences. Includes social problem-solving, anger management, consideration for others, and effective discipline and shaping of behaviour.

Most of the parents' comments on this topic can be grouped around the word discipline because in providing boundaries and guidance for children the parents became preoccupied with two issues. These were:

1. What boundaries do I set and what do I consider is appropriate or inappropriate experience and behaviour?
2. How much do I exert control over my child? How do I guide them in the direction I consider appropriate and what methods do I use to exert influence or control?

To some extent, the responses grouped here represent the other side of the coin to the parents' responses about good basic care, ensuring safety, emotional warmth and the provision of stimulating activities. These all contributed to building a parent-child relationship where mutual trust and leading by example were aspired to, so that parents could gently guide and direct children without the guidance or boundary setting being too overt. Those parents who articulated their view of good parenting as fair, fun, calm and relaxed were also flagging up a light touch to verbal and physical discipline and this aspiration permeated the whole sample. Without using the word modelling, most parents aspired to provide a positive environment within which the child could be guided and directed, but where the child's views were kept firmly in focus. Most parents showed concern that their children fitted in with other children emotionally and behaved well at home, in nursery, school, or other public places.

Historically, smacking and, in some homes, out-of-home care, and schools, the beating of children has been acceptable in English culture. The idea of parental rights being superior to children's rights is still within living memory and the concepts of physical, emotional, sexual abuse and parental responsibilities toward children have been developed and debated most in the last third of the twentieth century. It can be argued that since the early 1970s ideas about what constitutes reasonable discipline and what is abuse have been gradually redefined until brought together in the Children Act 1989 with the concept of parental responsibility clearly articulated. Alongside this, the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) has influenced policy and practice.

These parents were bringing up their children in a climate where smacking was more generally seen as unacceptable and those using parent support projects were aware of a no smacking policy in the project. However, there needs to be some caution here as, despite what the parents said, Smith et al. (1995), in a study of parental control in a community, found smacking was still commonly used to punish children. Therefore while this sample of parents were apparently hardly using physical chastisement, there was no check made on this,

and it is hard to assess the extent of change, ten years on from the Smith et al. findings without asking the children as well as the parents. Nonetheless it is also reasonable to assume the parents were genuinely seeking to realise their aspirations.

Aspirationally, therefore, the parents all saw themselves as having responsibilities, and viewed children as capable of having valid opinions of their own and having rights. Nothing any parent said contradicted this broad theoretical and assumptive position on being a parent. Most parents also disapproved of verbal abuse. Many of the parents had grown up in a different era of thinking and acting, with the outcome that what was said about guidance and boundaries was frequently in the context of making comparisons with their own childhood experiences.

Returning briefly to the baseline survey (Appendix 6, Table 1) which ended with one open question 'What should a parent try never to do', the majority of the answers were around issues relating to guidance and boundaries, which might be expected given the nature of the question. The responses were not just about smacking. The data shown in Table 1 shows that 10 parents of the 29 who responded to this section said they would never physically hurt a child, but a further 13 offered responses that suggested that they thought parents should not emotionally abuse a child, or control a child, by making them feel small or humiliated. One parent who said she would never do anything of what was done to her had experienced verbal and physical abuse and neglect. Another parent, who chose not to respond to this particular question when interviewed, had been brought up in foster care and described the experience as being horrible.

The parents appeared more concerned about the harm that might come from verbal humiliation and denigration (20 parents) than by the harm of smacking (10 parents). For example, one parent was concerned not to stigmatise a mixed race child, and others were concerned with other aspects of emotional well-being such as making sure children did not have to grow up too fast. One person was willing to use the occasional slap. Another parent

(3) said in her interview that she had occasionally smacked a child lightly in the past and a third would smack as a last resort. Overall the preferred parenting style of the sample was to provide high emotional warmth, little criticism, good relatedness, and communication which valued the developing child and responded to the child's lead.

From the interview data the impact of the parents' own upbringing on their ideas about guidance and boundaries seemed apparent, and some who had experienced maltreatment mentioned it voluntarily and with feeling. The parents therefore were actively deciding the extent to which they repeated what they experienced themselves while growing up, or whether to create their own preferred style. Parents frequently referred to their own childhood experiences, especially where these were less than satisfactory or abusive. However the majority aspiration could be described as providing relaxed discipline with boundaries in mind. However within that broad framework there were a range of perspectives.

Relaxed discipline but keeping boundaries in mind

Parent 3 best described one common approach in the words *disciplined without being overbearing*. Parent 9 valued *good discipline without it being too authoritarian*. This kind of approach was articulated by 13 parents across the sample (1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 25, 26, and 27). Three parents, (25, 26, 27), talking in a group discussed the relationship between a child's needs and good discipline. They thought any guidance should respond to the individual child's temperament, as children needed love and boundaries together, and should understand why parents had certain expectations of them:

... and that's one of the hardest things and understanding why children behave as they do and responding accordingly ... it's giving an explanation and trying to get them to understand why they have to do certain things. (25)

One parent said she used a variety of methods in helping her children to behave well:

I think I set down boundaries and they know what those are. They know when not to overstep the mark and what will happen if they do. (2)

Modelling of behaviour was often implied, and parents were trying to guide children. This was expressed particularly clearly by two mothers:

Everybody's idea is to be the best. It's just trying to guide them in the right directions, showing them how to grow up and hoping they don't get into drugs and things like that. (13)

I want them to be confident, to be their own person, to have their own mind ... when I was growing up I never had any confidence ... if you show them that is best. (12)

A relaxed authoritative style, which guided children in the desired directions, was strongly preferred, but managing that was easier for some than others. The ability to be calm, relaxed and yet authoritative seemed to depend heavily on the parent's own experience of being parented. This is where comparisons and contrasts among smaller groups of parents can be made. Several perspectives were apparent:

- Those who happily repeated their own experiences in new contexts (happy repeaters).
- Those who repeated some of their own childhood experiences but also made changes (repeating with a difference).
- Those who identified dissatisfaction with their childhood experiences of discipline and set out to be different (deciding to be different).
- Those whose opinions on discipline were different from close kin (handling differences in the family).

All the parents were adjusting to the changing circumstances of their own generation, societal attitudes and culture, but for some parents this involved more complexity than it did for others. For a fourth group of parents, a further issue arose, which was that of how to handle differences of opinion about child rearing, guidance and boundaries with their partner and/or close family. For these parents external points of reference, such as the family support projects or the use of books by experts, were particularly useful to settle disagreements. This is now discussed further under the four headings outlined above.

Happy repeaters

Eight parents described their families of origin extremely positively, and felt on the whole that the discipline and guidance they received was about right (1, 2, 3, 9, 11, 26, 28 and 29). Six of these parents were those who described themselves as in the category of *disciplined without being overbearing*, and that may have been learned from their own families of origin. These parents could use internalisation of their own parents' style to apply it in new contexts. Prior to the research they had not particularly examined what they were doing as it came easily and naturally. For example:

They were good at letting go and didn't hold us back, but boundaries were there, I think generally I would like to be like they were. (1)

I discipline the children the same way I was disciplined I think. Which is funny, as my mother is much softer with my children, which just makes me laugh as she was as tough on us as I am on my children ... if I do any things differently it's only because of society now. (2)

We are certainly not heavy handed parents and my parents were not heavily parental.
(3)

I think I try to be the same discipline wise, I don't ever remember being smacked more than once or twice when we was children and I think I'm pretty much the same. Not ever smacked - but not a lot. I think I agree with how they disciplined us really.
(9)

I don't think mum and dad ever did anything wrong with us. Mum was always there, looking out from the gate. There were older children around, who kept an eye on the younger ones. (11)

Another of the parents relied very much on her negotiating style, learned from her father, in order to manage the complexities of guiding her dual heritage son:

My dad negotiated, my negotiating comes from my Daddy. He played devil's advocate just to get us to negotiate ... it was unreal. It is not typical of Asian cultures ... (29)

This was standing her in good stead as she was from a Hindu background while her husband was white and an atheist. She identified many cultural issues around child rearing, and felt guidance and boundary issues were very complex because they also impacted her child's developing sense of identity:

Growing up in a mixed culture really, it is much bigger than I anticipated and especially now he is at school. It doesn't make sense to him and it is hard to be completely true to his identity because it isn't the same as mine or my husband's. (29)

One parent had strongly chosen to follow her parents in one aspect. She wanted not to smack because her parents never smacked her:

I wasn't smacked but I knew when my parents were cross with me and I knew when I had done wrong and they had a way of letting me know that and I thought that's something I can learn from. (26)

None of the parents included here had any critical comment to make on the way they were disciplined, and felt comfortable to be similar or the same. Any changes they made were simply, as parent 2 says, *because of society nowadays*. Another perspective on trying to pass on the parenting you received, but in a different way, came from a Muslim mother who wanted to pass on the parenting she received and bring her children up in a traditional Muslim way:

Those times it was easier, I think we behaved well but our children don't. We were obedient to our parents but it is very difficult to bring children up nowadays. (28)

So, even for those parents who wanted to repeat their own experiences, some shifts were inevitable. The next group of parents, however, were consciously making changes from their own childhoods, and had already thought about what they would do differently.

Repeating with a difference

Eleven parents, a third of the overall sample (5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 17, 22, 26, and 27) were not particularly critical of their childhoods, but were consciously making changes because either they wanted to discipline differently, or in some sense they thought that parents were too strict. One parent phrased it as:

(My son) gets away with more than we did. (8)

Two parents felt that their parents' moral values had perhaps been too rigid for them and reported how they were adapting:

I think I do quite a lot the same as my parents. I think they have high ideals about what's right and wrong. Perhaps it's the way life is these days it's not so clear cut. I accept things from my children that they wouldn't have accepted and would have been very angry about ... my morals are similar to theirs but I think my way is slightly more relaxed and understanding. (10)

I hope I am different from my mother in that she found it hard to move with the morals of the twentieth century as she was the product of a Victorian upbringing. I am going to have to move a lot faster if I want to stay friendly with my children and discuss their morals along the lines of their peer group. (5)

Other parents had also come to the conclusion that, while they did not want to criticise their parents, they were better ways to discipline and guide children than those they had experienced:

I do a lot different and try alternative methods. Like both of them are different so I have different ways of disciplining them. If we got wrong we got clipped. Mum was stricter than I am, they would give a tap on the bum which I don't. My attitude changed when I had bairns. I thought a tap on the bum would do but then I thought there had to be a different way. (12)

This parent (12) also thought it more important to teach her children respect for others and to share, rather than emphasise being clean and tidy as her mother did. She added on smacking that:

We got a smack and I suppose that taught us that we would get smacked if we did wrong but I don't want these to think that if they do wrong they are going to get hurt.

These parents were expressing a reflective critique of where they have made changes from their childhood experiences and why. They were not expressing dissatisfaction, but identifying what they felt were better ways. Although one parent thought her family could have been firmer on boundaries and said:

I think I'm harder on my kids than my mum and dad were on me. (17)

At the same time she was finding her father to be a support while she was living at her parent's home following domestic violence from a partner:

My dad's trying to teach them right from wrong at the moment, because he's the only male figure they have and they really do look up to him ... (17)

This group identified practices that on reflection they thought were not so good, and ways of guiding and setting boundaries that they thought were better. While they did not express the view that what they disliked had damaged them, they were clear about the need to move on and make changes. Often they thought that their parents' ways of guiding had been to some degree stifling, restrictive or slightly misguided, and were quietly negotiating changes to what suited their own situation better. However, a third group of parents had stronger views about making changes and were more negative about their own childhood experiences.

Deciding to be different

Nine parents, all from sample 2 (14, 15, 16, 18, 21, 26, 27, 32, 33) expressed varying degrees of dissatisfaction with the way they experienced discipline as children. All these parents spoke feelingly. For some of them the family support project they attended played a very important role by helping them work out their own feelings, and find different strategies for providing guidance and boundaries for their own children. One parent thought that while her parents meant well, the family environment was emotionally unsatisfactory:

We were quite disciplined as children and I don't want to discipline in the way I was disciplined. It was that era and that is probably how they were parented as children but I still don't like it. I think there is a reason for every child's behaviour and I think you can get to the bottom of it. (15)

She spoke strongly about how as a child she was not allowed to speak or explain, and was sent to her room with no explanation. She spoke negatively of strictness which had no apparent *follow through or reasoning*, and she placed great value on relationship building with her son as a means of guidance, and hoped that *he will be a better person for it*. She would certainly never send a child to his or her room or take an action without giving a child an explanation about it.

Three parents identified unfairness, saying that one child or another (including themselves) was favoured by a parent, which is something they tried to avoid. For example:

My dad tended to spoil me and not my sister and I have thought a lot about that ... if I can't give to both the other one don't get. (18)

Another parent (15) was made responsible for her siblings at a young age, and would never, therefore, do that to her children. She treated her children as individuals. Parent 16 was very afraid of his father who disciplined *through fear and a rod of iron*. This had made it difficult for him to discipline his own son, and he was very appreciative of the opportunities the family support project provided to discuss this, particularly his tendency to overcompensate his son by being lax on the basis of his own poor experience. Another parent, who had already said that she was glad her mother was many thousands of miles away and could not see her to criticise her also commented that:

I got smacked constantly as a child ... my mother says I spoil my children ... I do it as a last resort ... my children are given more independence. (27)

One of the consequences of being treated badly in childhood is that parents might know what they do not want to do to their own children, but perhaps not have internalised, learned or experienced any positive strategies. In this situation, a parent is more likely to be out of touch with, or distanced from, their family of origin and to hesitate about being firm. Family support projects are particularly useful in guiding and supporting these families. A parent, who experienced an impoverished and fragmented upbringing had no one to look to for support outside the family support project and said:

To have a child who has temper tantrums twenty-four hours a day and by the end of the second day you are at your wits end. So you try and find a routine or a way out to benefit the child as well as to benefit yourself. (18)

Some of the parents were clearly maltreated. One parent said her dad was strict and she was abused and beaten by him. She had no education because of domestic problems at home. Fortunately she can now relate to her mother and her mother's new partner:

We have a better life now than we did when we were young. (30)

She said she would look out for her kids so they would not be abused, but did not expand on how she managed behaviour apart from consulting her mother and to say that she would *always consider her kid's needs*. She was left in the position of knowing what she would like to provide for her children, but on a steep learning curve on the details and strategies.

Two parents (32, 33) expressed their anger about abusive treatment in their childhoods. The strength of feeling they used when alluding to, but not talking about it, suggested that they had been seriously maltreated as children. They were wary about what they disclosed, and

asked at the beginning of the interview to have the tape recorder switched off at any point that they chose, which was agreed. They also checked carefully that it was acceptable not to answer questions. They both expressed a wish to set boundaries for their own children and to protect them from harm. While they said they would never smack or shout at the children they could not say what else might be better. Another mother who had been in care (21) was looking for new role models on which to base the guidance of her son, and was back in contact with her father, looking to him for direction.

Handling differences in the family

Some parents had different views on guidance and boundaries from their partners and/or own parents or in-laws. One parent was basing her current child rearing on Penelope Leach because she did not feel she could discuss parenting with her own mother, but fundamentally disagreed with her in-laws views which she found old fashioned and strict:

My mother is too old and would worry ... my husband's parents, I don't respect their views on child rearing ... they are diametrically opposed to my view ... in terms of routines ... If it's 10 o'clock it's feeding time and then it's potty time ... (7)

Another mother was not in agreement with her husband's family or her husband on discipline and her general approach to raising children:

He feels that children should be seen and not heard, well not quite that strict, he feels that dad should be respected which is ok - but you can't make kids be quiet all the time. They want to play and that's what they do. (23)

The family support project was very important to this parent in moderating views. Her approach to guiding her children was different from everyone in the family: her mother, her

husband's family and her husband. She was clear and confident about her own ideas, but tested them out with the centre staff, and used their views to argue her case at home.

Some parents sought to deal with the discipline they had experienced and their feelings about it. Sometimes this led to their being indulgent rather than strict; sometimes it just left them trying to do different, but unsure of how to be a positive parent in practice. Parent 31 expressed these issues in complex ways. Both he and his partner had childhood difficulties and were young parents of three small children. The father, who left school at 15 to look after the children while his wife worked, said:

I do discipline him, he does listen, and he does as he is told. His mother, she can scream and shout at him, and I don't know whether it is because I am male or not, but what I say to him, he will stop and listen. So am I too strict? I have been brought up like that.

Manners and things like that, yes. I think it is a very important thing to have, manners. So if you don't start having that, you are not going to have them when you are older. I think you should teach kids to have manners.

But it is virtually totally the opposite to the way my mum brought me up. I had two elder brothers you see. So ... they got spoilt and then the youngest brother came along and he got spoilt rotten, and I was in the middle, and I didn't really get spoilt that much, whereas the eldest one did and the youngest one did. So ... I will spoil all my kids.

Yes, they all get spoilt. I have had discussions with my wife about my spoiling the kids, because now they have started to take advantage of it, and they realise that like the little boy, you take him to the shop, he picks up a magazine and you buy it

for him. But now he is starting to take liberties and picking up magazines, crisps, and everything, and when he doesn't get his own way he has a paddy. (15)

This parent was struggling with where to place boundaries, both in relation to his own background, and the views of his partner. He began by *spoiling* to compensate only to find that his children became difficult to guide. He was also proud of being a full-time father and felt that he and his wife were good parents compared with their own parents. The father had respect for the male support worker in the project and took advice from him about how to bring up his children.

Main points

- Parents expressed concern to find new ways to discipline which avoid smacking and physical and verbal abuse.
- Parents were most concerned not to criticise or belittle children.
- Parents preferred to provide guidance in a relaxed and authoritative way.
- Parents' ability to set boundaries and provide constructive guidance was influenced by the discipline they experienced as children.
- Family support projects were particularly useful for parents who felt unsure about how to set boundaries and guide children's behaviour.

This topic of guidance and boundaries was important to parents, and again they were able to illustrate the Assessment Framework definition in nuanced ways, describing their contemporary aspirations for their children. Whatever their abilities to carry out their intentions, the parents overall were looking to be relaxed, but provide firm boundaries for children's behaviour. On the whole their ideas about giving guidance and preserving boundaries differed to some degree from their own parents, and this is where views from peers, family support projects and childrearing books were useful. Those who had little shift to make benefited from the inter-generational stability this gave them. Those parents

wanting to change radically from their parents' way of disciplining found family support projects helpful.

In discussing guidance and boundaries, and emotional warmth, stability has been touched on because positive parental capacity in these two areas provides for a stable and loving environment within which a child can develop. However there are other aspects of stability which are considered next.

Stability

The Assessment Framework defines stability as:

Providing a sufficiently stable family environment to enable a child to develop and maintain a secure attachment to the primary caregiver(s) in order to ensure optimal development. Includes ensuring secure attachments are not disrupted, providing consistency of emotional warmth over time and responding in a similar manner to the same behaviour. Parental responses change and develop according to the child's developmental progress. In addition, ensuring children keep in contact with important family members and significant others.

Some aspects of providing stability relating to parental responsiveness have inevitably been discussed in the consideration of basic care, emotional warmth and ensuring safety. Other aspects such as the stability of family environment and the importance of wider family members can be explored further now. However, stability has to be measured over time so that this study is relying on those parts of the parents' accounts which give some sense of their situations over time, as well as their present circumstances.

The parents were all living in reasonably stable personal and financial situations at the time of the interviews. The parents using family support projects were only interviewed if their situations were currently sufficiently stable, so that their skills in parenting would not

be derailed by the research process. However it is apparent from what two parents said that their parenting had been affected by destabilising events such as conflicts with partners:

Me and my partner separated. We are just not compatible. (16)

We are split, his parents are alcoholics, I am worried that he'll get in touch when they are older and lead the kids into bad ways. (18)

At the time of the research all the parents were providing at least a sufficiently stable family environment to enable a child to develop and maintain a secure attachment to the primary caregiver. However because some of the families had experienced past turbulence and distress, there were differences in the degree of stability the children in the sample could expect. Most had sufficient stability; but some might be judged to have had only just sufficient. Differences were linked to parental income, education, family background, employment, housing, recreation and leisure opportunities. Some of the children were living with parents who had experienced severe disadvantage in the past, which inevitably impacted in the present. One parent was glad to have left the hardships she faced in Zimbabwe, but at the same time was alone bringing up children in an alien culture with no traditional family support:

My parenting is hit and miss I think. In my case I am on my own in uncharted waters. Where I come from the children are grown up by the family not by you. My sister might come and decide to take the children and just say pack your clothes we are going and I wouldn't be in a position to say no. Now I can decide myself, but there is no one to baby-sit I am really on my own. I am trying my best ... at the end of the day we are a family unit and I'm in charge. (27)

Optimal development can never be ensured when children have unequal life chances. Even when secure attachments are not disrupted, and where there is consistency of emotional warmth growing up with a committed single mother, living on benefits is different from living in a dual professional household. Additionally some children experienced emotional consistency of attachment to wider family members and in the community, in addition to parent figures, which gave a breadth of stability and a safety net when things went wrong. A financially secure and emotionally strong extended family can provide protective support when adversity comes along. For example parent 10, a single parent, had been supported to parent by a strong extended family, and she was economically secure. Parent 7 has found it easier to be a parent in her second relationship, because she was better supported, both emotionally and financially.

Some parents were struggling to carry out their aspirations even with support. Some of this was through adverse social and economic experiences, and some through the consequences of an inner deprivation in emotional resources for parenting, or the result of poor childhood experiences. Every parent was doing their best to meet children's needs, but it was far more difficult for a parent to provide stability with limited financial and/or emotional resources available. It was harder to ensure stability where the parent experienced disruption in relationships and a lack of support from kin. Networks of friends and the family support centres made a difference. The bleakest interview, with parents 32 and 33, showed parents with abusive backgrounds, partners away working, clinging together for support in their parenting in what they perceived as a very hostile world.

In these circumstances some of the children in the sample have to be considered more vulnerable than others, and in less stable situations, irrespective of their own or their parents' inner strengths, abilities and resilience. In addition, ensuring children keep in contact with important family members and significant others was simply not an option for some parents. This can be compared with the support others could take for granted:

We've good support and a network of friends who are knowledgeable, I've got a sister who has two children and her youngest is the same age as my child so that's useful and there's mums and dads relatives. quite spread out but we've always some-one within an hour of travelling, so yes we've quite a number of people around. (9)

Main points

- Attachment and emotional connectedness to a committed adult was the key component of stability for all the children.
- Financial and social advantages contributed to support a greater chance of stability.
- Stability was also provided by a parent's ability to provide suitable guidance and boundaries
- Children's stability was increased when a range of extended family and community support resources were available.
- Destabilising events could be buffered by the existence of a committed parent and other family and community supports

Summary

Stimulation

Stimulation is an area where quality of experiences tells. All the children had toys and were starting education, all the parents wanted to give the children time, but the quality of what was offered, and the opportunities that might be seen as significant, were closely associated with parental income, personality and experience. For example, it was the parents in sample 1 who mentioned music, community activities and hobbies. A striking feature for the purposes of this thesis was that books and reading with the child was a significant part of stimulating activity for all the parents, irrespective of their own degree of literacy. This raises the interesting question as to what extent books may function to

compensate for and level social difference, or to what extent limited choices and opportunities continue to perpetuate disadvantages. This will be explored further later as the extent to which reading with children enhances parenting capacity is discussed.

Guidance and boundaries

Generational shifts in patterns of disciplining children were a lived reality for the parents. It is interesting that they still talked more about discipline and less of guidance and boundaries. All the parents were aspiring to a model of parenting that set standards and tried to encourage children to achieve them. If there were differences between sample 1 and sample 2 it was because in sample 1 there was more often an easier transition to make from parental practices: the shifts were slight, and already a relaxed but firm style was internalised. It is important for parents to be able to repeat their own experiences happily or be able to make small differences in style. From what the parents said, it seemed more effort was needed to start from a position of not wanting to repeat the past. For some of the parents in the second sample, especially those who were maltreated, there were major adjustments to make in working out how to offer the best discipline to their children, without repeating the mistakes of the past or over compensating. These parents welcomed support with this particular aspect of parenting.

Stability

Stability proved the most elusive capacity to consider. It appeared that many of the children in the families in sample 1 experienced stability of parenting which would meet their developmental needs, while some of the parents in the second sample had themselves experienced instabilities which might impact on the children. Instability becomes significant when it derails a child's opportunity for development. At the time of the interviews all the families, irrespective of the past, were experiencing a relatively stable time in their lives. All the children were in a situation where their parents were committed to remaining attached to them, displaying emotional warmth, working to guide them effectively, and hoping to provide them with the best opportunities they could. However, stability over time is hard to predict,

but it seemed that those children living in environments with good social and economic circumstances, that would support them at times of adversity, were most likely to have their stability guaranteed.

This chapter completes the presentation of the parents' views on the six dimensions or tasks associated with parental capacity in the Assessment Framework. The next chapter will consider the contribution of parental reading with children to the six parenting capacity dimensions

Chapter 8

Children and parents reading books together: parents' views

Introduction

The last two chapters have considered the parents' views on parenting and found much congruence between their approach and the Assessment Framework. In their interviews the parents were also asked questions designed to find out about the place of reading with children in their lives. This chapter analyses their responses within the Assessment Framework parenting capacity dimensions, albeit slightly differently to the order presented in the last two chapters, and includes:

- Data about what the parents had recently read with children.
- Data about where the parents obtained books.
- A consideration of what the parents said about reading with their children in relation to the Assessment Framework parenting capacity dimensions.

Reading is a natural part of being a parent for all the participants, and 31 out of the 33 parents gave an account of what they had read recently, and where they obtained books. This is shown in Tables 2 and 3. While this study is not primarily an analysis of what books parents and children read, this information is contextually relevant.

What the parents and children were reading

While all the parents read to their children, some mentioned a rich range of reading (for example, parents 1 and 3) while others relied much more, and occasionally entirely, on the family support project and/or what came home from school (for example, parent 30).

Therefore the children's experiences of a range of books differ according to parental abilities and interests. The majority of the children were read to regularly and saw many books. All the

parents were fairly conservative in their choice of books, staying with what they had liked as children (e.g. Enid Blyton), extending this with what the library offered, what school sent home, and crucially what was promoted by shops and book clubs. A comparison of the literature review in Chapter 3, with Table 2, suggests that most parents could expose their children to a wider range of reading. It is also evident that parents buy what is marketed or on television, with *Thomas the Tank Engine* and *Bob the Builder* being mentioned the most for young children and *Harry Potter* being very prominent. This bears out the view of Zipes (2001) that children's literature, in the twenty-first century is often commodified.

Family support projects were invaluable for exposing parents to new books. Parents 20, 21, 22 commented on this in their group, and as a result were actively seeking books that explained experiences for their children. Table 2 also shows that 21 of the 33 parents were drawing from books in order to explain experiences to young children, for example going to hospital, or a new baby arriving. Some parents said they preferred just to talk to their children but many parents were interested (after the interview) in looking at some examples of modern children's books which I had. These were books which helped children with experiences such as starting school, and books with reasonable ethnic and gender content.

The books to which children were exposed at certain ages correlated with Tucker's analysis, as discussed in Chapter 3. Small children were looking at situational picture books with parents, and at tales with representational animals and other symbolic parents. Older children were reading books about children engaged in exciting quests and experiences where parents were absent. They were also reading more books with some social realism. Table 2 reflects the popularity of certain authors at the time the research was undertaken, such as Shirley Hughes, Roald Dahl, J. K. Rowling and Jacqueline Wilson. Table 2 also shows the presence of familiar classics, and these were books that the parents had read as children and now read with their own children.

The acquisition of books

Parents used a range of ways of obtaining books, as shown in Table 3. There is an apparent contradiction; as the most affluent parents borrowed the most books rather than purchasing them. This is partially explained by the fact that the suburb they lived in was well resourced for libraries. Other participants, living in cities, also used libraries and those in rural settings less. However this finding also reflects the sample's educational background and values as the following comments show:

We go to the library a lot, probably once a fortnight and they get 6 books each, they also bring a reading book from school. (1)

We get the majority of our books from the library. It's embarrassing we have a shipping order about every fortnight. We are all on 6 books and we probably double that up as you are only allowed six at once but we've got twelve so that's between three of us 36. My children occasionally buy books but I put them off buying books because they really should use the library. It's an excellent resource, you can have so much choice and it doesn't cost anything. (5)

Because people know us we get books as presents. We do go to the library but we've got so many books that we don't need to at the minute. (8)

Books are actually quite expensive, so we do go to the library and she's just had her first birthday and her 6 friends all gave her a book ... we get some from Oxfam ... she has a growing collection, hand me downs and we did join a children's book club. (9)

...some from school, some from the library, some from book clubs at school. I tend to read a lot. I tend to buy them which is a bit naughty. Bookshops have a fascination for me. (10)

The children of parents from sample 1 were exposed, on the whole, to a more book rich environment, derived from a range of sources, especially bearing in mind that two of the library users in sample 2 are the family support project workers. The children also proportionately received more books as presents. There was not a total contrast, for example:

Parent 14, a nursery officer:

I love books and we go to the library and I've instilled that in him.

and Parent 16, a nurse:

Well I've always enjoyed reading and I hope I can pass that on ... I'm encouraging them by letting them see me read.

Partly, the age of the children was relevant. Two parents in sample 2 said they might use libraries when the children were older, but it is apparent and not surprising that the more the parent was educated and themselves read, the wider and more stimulating was the range of books to which the child was exposed. The process of selecting them, for some children, also involved more opportunity and range of reading material. By way of stark contrast, one parent (30) who could not read herself said that she *never went to school* and *never really read books*. She was now looking at *Scooby Doo*, a comic book, with one of the children and said that:

Now I like Scooby Doo. I like the pictures and make stories up as I go along. (30)

Her children read to her:

School days like, after tea they have to learn the alphabet and read their school books or something, like they might read books out loud and I listen. (30)

Between these contrasts is a range of other experiences. For example, parents 25, 26 and 27 borrowed a variety of books from the family support project, belonged to book clubs and also bought books. Parent 27, a Japanese woman, used books for teaching language skills to her bilingual son, although she disliked the books sent to her from Japan from her parents because they are *full of stereotypes*. When this was explored, she explained that these were moral tales perpetuating traditional values. Parents 23 and 24 also borrowed books from the family support project, and libraries, and bought books from book clubs. Parent 27 had particularly sought out a book on Pakistan and China to explain the background of her son's schoolmates to him:

He knows all about black and white children because I've got a black friend. But he's more into asking. He's only 5 and I wondered should he be thinking that now. I haven't got any Pakistani and Chinese friends so I got a book about it.

Family support projects are very influential in providing a variety of books for the younger children, and schools subsequently have great influence by providing book clubs with discounts and lending books to parents. It was noticeable that the family support project parents were more exposed to newer books and those which carried positive messages about diversity. Five of the parents were entirely dependent on these kinds of resources and one person (parent 30) would only read when the children took the initiative.

Critically for this study, every parent, irrespective of social and cultural background, valued reading with their children and saw it as important for the child's development. Everyone enjoyed some regular shared experiences sharing books with children and encouraged children to learn to read. Reading children's books was a commonplace part of parenting for everyone, including the parent unable to read herself. However, while in educational and stimulation terms what you read matters, in another respect it is not what you read that counts, but rather the process of reading. For this reason the analysis in this chapter in relation to the Assessment Framework is broken down into two main sections. These are:

- Emotional warmth, basic care and stability.
- Guidance and boundaries, ensuring safety and stimulation.

This is because in the first section, the process of reading can be argued to be as important as the content, while in the second section the content is significant.

Emotional warmth, basic care and stability

Reading with children is a critical component of building relatedness and emotional warmth (attachment). Every parent viewed reading as a good way for children and parents to be close together, and some expanded on this to describe reading as a way to build relatedness and to talk. The parents also made links between the stability and comfort of the reading experience, and the way that reading with a child was linked into the emotional closeness of aspects of basic care. This was particularly strong in relation to winding down at the end of the day, bathtime and bedtime. Therefore in this section the interrelationship between reading and those dimensions of the Assessment Framework are very evident.

While a finding that reading together brings parents and children emotionally closer is nothing new, it is interesting that a generation of parents who have TV, cinema, video, CDROM, DVD etc. did not see these as replacing the experience of reading with children as a way to become close and related. These other media may have been present in the home, and children may have experienced and used them, but they had not replaced the value of reading for the parents. The other media supplemented reading, and often led to a return to the original book. For example *Thomas the Tank Engine* (Awdry, 2005) has enjoyed a renaissance in parallel with the TV series, and no doubt *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Lewis, 2006) will be reread following the film of one of the books. Where parents and children really enjoy a book this can influence what becomes cinema, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* is an example. The inference from talking with these parents was that TV and video may be more used to keep children occupied while parents are busy, but that books were something that parents and children shared together, especially in the early years. As one parent said:

It makes you feel very special if someone reads to you. It allows you to experience a more kinetic approach. You are listening and can imagine it more yourself, you can experience the emotions of the characters because someone's putting those emotions into words ... you can enjoy being read to more than television ... it gives opportunities to talk if you don't understand and pleasure. (5)

The majority of the parents (31) expressed a view that reading with a child brought emotional closeness, and they identified several aspects of the experience. They also linked reading with the creation of the calmness and relaxed styles of parenting that they had already said that they aspired to. The parents expressed these views confidently and with conviction. There were several ways of expressing this, although inevitably there is overlap. These are categorised, and then discussed in turn, as:

- Love time and cuddles.
- Quality and relaxing time, attentiveness.
- Bonding, sharing, emotional closeness.
- Comfort, familiarity and fun.
- A book at bedtime.
- Benefits for larger families.

Love time and cuddles

Parents 7, 9, 13, 16, 17, 18, 20, 23, 25, 29

The physical contact that happens when children and parents read together was mentioned explicitly by 10 parents, proportionately more in sample 2. Some spoke warmly in one line comments, for example *it is a love type thing* (9), or *it's the way to be close* (16, 17). Others expressed it in more detail, often leading on to another aspect, for example attention:

We sit and have a cuddle and look at the pictures. Because I am having another baby I can't start bedtime reading knowing I can't continue, so we read in the day ... it's quality time, closeness and my complete attention. (13)

I think one of the lovely things is having a child snuggle down your lap reading something. (7)

Or cuddling and talking are linked:

It's just that special time when you are snuggled up and cosy and it opens up discussions into things you know ... how they might be feeling about this ... (25)

Quality and relaxing time, attentiveness

Parents 1, 3, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17, 19, 31

About half the parents (13 parents), across the sample, also emphasised the quiet time, the quality time and the relaxation between parent and child reading together. There is a sense of companionship between child and parent in these comments:

It's a nice way of spending time together. (1)

One of the things is being together, sitting. (7)

There comes a time when the baby is sitting on my knee, looking at a book and it's a nice thing to do together. (9)

The child thinks it's wonderful when you sit with them reading. (19)

This time spent in this way was companionable but was also reinforcing stability and security in relationships.

Bonding, sharing, emotional closeness

Parents 4, 5, 9, 10, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, 30, 31

Just over half the parents made the link between emotional closeness (attachment) and reading. More sample 2 than sample 1 parents expressed the pleasure of reading with a child in this particular way. Five parents used the word 'bond' for emotional closeness and psychological connectedness. The idea of reading building relatedness and closeness came across strongly from six parents and by implication from others. One father put it this way:

I know it may sound a bit corny, but I feel when I am reading to him about things that we are having a real connection. It is like a bond between us when we are sat there reading. But when he gets down it is gone. (31)

It's the bond that 5 minutes for you and them ... this is their loving and special time. (17)

And another parent who had said she was struggling to parent also said:

It might not be every night, it might be at the end of the day but I try and read to them every day, it is important to have that contact with them. (18)

This was also passing connectedness from one generation to the next:

I think it (reading) does him the world of good. I can't remember my mum sitting reading stories, I don't know if that is because I was too young, but I'd like them to remember and pass it on. (12)

Comfort, familiarity and fun

Parents 2, 6, 8, 14, 19, 30

Six of the parents commented on the pleasure of books:

I would want a child of mine to get a sense of comfort and fun out of books ... and warmth ... (2)

Reading provided a basis for talking, playing, and having fun together, especially when using action books with smaller children or sharing a joke with older ones. There can be shared imaginative experiences and joy:

It is not just reading a story, but talking about it and laughing if funny things happen. (6)

I do think reading is a good way to build a relationship with a child ... it gives them time to realise they can do other things besides dashing around. There is magic in the pages of books and in your mind. (14)

They can be so funny when they are reading. You can get joy out of it from their eyes ... it's all closeness, contact and togetherness. (19)

As well as identifying many aspects of the emotional warmth to be had from reading together, the parents linked books to one particular aspect of basic care, bedtime, although as Chapter 9 will show when parents are shown pictures of basic care in books this can provoke a fuller range of comment.

A book at bedtime

Parents 1, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 18, 22, 23, 28, 29

Books were commonly used by 12 parents for winding children down at the end of the day, and for creating intimacy and calm at bedtime. One parent also linked books and illness:

K has a lot of asthma attacks and she's been at home a lot, and also at bedtime it's a nice way to be calm together. (1)

I've read to him since he was a tiny baby; we read a bedtime story and point to things. (8)

I think it's nice in the evening to settle down and have a book and a cuddle and that's the last thing they do before they go to sleep. (11)

The other link parents made was that the book at bedtime was a chance to look back on the day. This parent reflected back on when her children were younger:

We read every night when they went to bed ... it's a quiet time but also if you have things to talk about you can. You don't always have time with just the normal hustle and bustle of life so you can catch up on the day's events. (10)

Another parent, the grandmother in sample 1, talked about a book she used to help children wind down:

It's lovely to see that they have had a lovely day. There are all sorts of toys in the garden and they have been growing things and inside the house it is warm and cosy with things going on in the kitchen. Mum's with the little girl baking or making sandwiches ... There's a look of closeness and relationship after a lovely day making tea or supper. (4)

Another said:

S has always loved books and I guess he loves books because we introduced them very early on, but because we've always had books so he's used to them - but now that he's a boisterous 5 year old, there's another reason I love books with him - it's that quiet time. It's part of a routine now and it's the time where we say 'OK now, toys away, calm down, pyjamas on, drink of milk, brush teeth, books', and it's that he almost knows he can switch in to - ah - that calm time - and he knows it's that time. (29)

There were also benefits from reading for parents who had large families and wanted to have a calm time at the end of the day.

Benefits for larger families

Parents 3, 15, 23, 26, 28

Five parents, all of whom had 3 or 4 children and some of whom took on most of the child care alone, found reading times particularly important, both as a means of having some quietness and relaxation but also as a means of building special time for each child:

It gives me time with each individual one. Sometimes it is nice sitting around in a circle and reading with them all ... we've got loads of books in the house downstairs and in their bedrooms. There are books that they can rip up and still look at, and good books that I put aside and read at night. The triplets are starting to read now. (15)

I've got 3 kids and it's hard enough to find time and for each individual one and reading is one way, when you know you can have closeness, that time, special. (26)

I've got 4 kids and it's absolutely hectic. At bedtime it is lovely to curl up with them; especially C, she's three and absolutely loves it. I read to her in bed and she looks at books until she falls asleep. (23)

I read in the evening about 5 o'clock, all 4 together and all 4 are interested, even though the four year old doesn't understand, she looks at the pictures. They all enjoy it and are quiet when they are reading. (28)

The parents universally found reading with children beneficial, and pleasurable. Most detailed comment focused around emotional warmth. The usefulness of reading in building closeness and relatedness for all parents and children seemed beyond question. However, some of the parents' own circumstances enabled them to provide this more richly as can be seen by a summary provided by one parent:

The main time for reading is bedtime, it's nice together and it's a relaxing time. It encourages a love of books and familiarity with what we know and an encouragement to read harder things. There is a lot of information and entertainment. There are lessons to be learned like pets dying and children being picked on, some of it's escapism and reading about things children will never do ... but it's all appreciated. (3)

The activity of reading with children was integral to emotional warmth, basic care and also to stability. As already suggested stability is an outcome of a secure attachment and continuing care. It was therefore inherent in the way parents used books to create relatedness and order the day. It was also noticeable from what the parents said, as quoted above and when recalling being read to as children, that reading was also a way of sharing across generations, and transmitting the pleasure of books. Children were advantaged when a rich range of such resources were available to them. The place of reading in guidance (passing on values), and boundaries, dealing with experiences (ensuring safety), and opening up children to new experiences (stimulation), is considered next.

Guidance and boundaries, ensuring safety and stimulation

This section is organised under headings which reflect links between what was said about the parents' reading and aspects of the Assessment Framework parenting capacity dimensions. These are:

- Education and learning.
- Guidance, new experiences and challenge.
- Role models and windows on the world.

Education and learning

It can be argued that reading, education and stimulation go hand in hand. Sixteen parents (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 15, 18, 19, 24, 25, 27, 28, 30), half the sample, linked reading to education or learning. This was both in terms of literacy and the content of books. As might be expected, the extent of the articulation of this aspect reflected the parents own educational achievements and, in sample 1 the word education was more often used than learning. Parents were concerned to develop children's reading skills early. They encouraged children to read for themselves to obtain information from books.

Developing skills

There were 3 main strands to this:

First, starting to help very small children to appreciate and learn from books:

I hope it helps him with his reading. We are learning recognition of colours and things like that and the pleasure is helping him with his development and speech.

(8)

Second, helping children move from reading with parents to independent reading:

I will read a book at the beginning to get her started and if we get going she will read the rest on her own. (1)

The one I read to most is 6 and he has a huge range of books from when he was younger and is moving on to the ones that were the older children's. (3)

Third, encouraging reading to support other learning:

Reading gives a broader knowledge, a general knowledge. It gives them a broader interest on lots of things and I am glad it hadn't been forced, I've encouraged them and they've taken it on themselves now ... my reading to them isn't as appropriate as it was. (2)

They have lots of books for learning. They've got active imaginations like they know when Farmers Weekly is out and they look at it, they need an interest. (13)

... educationally, he is going to have to read when he gets to school ... (6)

I think they have education at school so I don't throw it at them ... but if they want to read educational books ... but mainly relaxation. (16)

... they can learn from books. (18)

Reading can also be a way of handling a child's experiences and opening up their awareness of new worlds. While some parents referred to this, it was not with the same confidence or awareness as the understanding of the links between reading, education and emotional warmth. In fact it was an area of concern for some parents, especially those with older children, that books might bring values and ideas to their children that were unhelpful.

Guidance, new experiences and challenge

Younger children

As already noted, 21 of the parents had already used a book to prepare a small child for an event like going to hospital, or to help them to understand an experience such as death. Five of the parents (3, 7, 11, 12, 19) talked about this in more detail:

I've got a selection of books that deals with things about shyness about a bullying that I particularly bought for K for her skin problems that she would need to deal with. We have read them and she hasn't classed herself in any of those positions as yet. I suppose that is a good thing really because she sees herself as the same as everybody else. I think those sort of books are quite important because they help us as parents to put it over in a language the child understands, where sometimes we could have difficulty putting these things over, about bullying about being unkind to people those sort of general things. (3)

We did that when grandma died, we looked at books on bereavement. We sat and read the book so that H could understand what had happened to grandma and that she wasn't the only one this happened to. (11)

It brings it real, if they have something in a book they understand what it is like. You can show them and they aren't fearful, you take the worry out and they know they are not the only one. (12)

Well my grandson's grandfather is dying and they are getting a book on bereavement, my grandson thinks his grandfather doesn't love him any more because he doesn't see him. (19)

All the parents were comfortable with the idea that using books to help small children was useful; the only issue in this respect was that sometimes such books were not easy to find. Parent 19 had heard there was a useful book on bereavement about a badger but didn't know the title. Another parent knew of it because of her role as community priest but could not find the book she wanted about changing nursery classes:

When a great granddad of the elder ones died I had a book called Badgers Parting Gifts. It is a book I still use today, if I'm doing a funeral, and I know there are children I give it to the family, quite often. I think books are a good way for children to understand things. I think I've already mentioned Sarah's Potty showing how we use a potty. When we first went on an aeroplane I bought a book about aeroplanes and I do tend to use books as a backup prop for things that are going to happen in life. When we moved I didn't do it. She's changing classes in nursery but I haven't found a book about that. (7)

Three parents said they had looked for books about certain experiences in bookshops and not found them. Parent 11 however had asked at the local library and found several useful books as a result, even one about being a bridesmaid.

In fact, there is an increasing range of such books, but availability is not good in bookshops. A survey of the Amazon website showed a range of resources. Parents were making little use of children's librarians. Again, schools and family support projects could be more proactive in promoting helpful books for children and on parenting, especially as it was noticeable that some of the parents said they were more likely to search for books for information than ask someone for advice about their concerns. Several sample books were left behind with parents towards the end of the research. Parents had already used books to talk about experiences including: shyness, bullying, sexual development, cultural matters, babies being born, going to hospital, potty training, doctors, hospital, loss,

bereavement, starting school, siblings, being a bridesmaid, pets, separation and divorce, being lost, adoption. The study found parents were very willing to supplement their talking with children with helpful books and stories.

Older children

The parents expressed two kinds of perspectives on using books with older children to handle experiences. On the one hand two parents, (26, 27) in one of the family support projects thought that books for older children did not reflect their children's lived realities:

There aren't many stories that touch on those issues about the fact that lives are not like that ... that life isn't that simple. Life is quite simple in a lot of these stories. It's like there's mum and there's dad and there's granny and there's all these friends and so on and actually life isn't that simple for a lot of kids is it? (26)

These two parents criticised books for older children as presenting stereotypical families:

Grandparents, if they are around, may be a long way away and people may have died and dads have come and gone and things like that ... I don't find many stories until they get older you can find these. My eldest is getting into to some of those kinds of stories now and is completely confused by them because she doesn't really understand all the things that are going on or anything other than an ideal family. (27)

The parents also thought that books for young people failed to explore all the possibilities of the young person's own sexuality, or the possibility of parents being anything other than heterosexual:

Yes I think as a parent you've got to be on the ball as well. You've got to read it yourself and see what it teaches them. Do you know what I mean? You've got be aware what images you are sending out. I'm a single parent in a relationship and it's man and woman, but it doesn't always go like that. Do you know what I mean? (26)

These two parents thought Jacqueline Wilson was probably the only author who began to touch on a wider range of experiences and life styles. Interestingly, it was Jacqueline Wilson's books that concerned other parents. Two parents in the first sample identified that there were books for older children with problems:

There are a lot of books where there are problems. The parents have problems and the children have problems and I think in a lot of books the children are looking for ideal families. I mean there are things like the suitcase kid where they've split up and she desperately wants to have the one house back again and not to be travelling between the two families. And there's the little girl who's in the home and there's the woman who comes in who's a writer and she desperately wants her to be her foster parent. (1)

This parent is also referring to books by Jacqueline Wilson, whose was becoming prominent at the time of the interviews. She thought the books were helpful in enabling her children to understand the situations of other children, but another parent was less sure about the introduction of a different world with different values to her own:

My daughter's been reading quite a few books by Jacqueline Wilson recently and I've been reading them with her. They are aimed at 10, 11, 12 year olds I suppose. They're quite controversial and they are written with today's child in mind. Quite honestly it came as quite a shock to me, they are really so up to date

in that they are talking about situations that so many of my daughter's friends are in. Certainly these books by Jacqueline Wilson are very thought provoking and that slightly annoyed me because it sort of indicated that that's how everyone was. (5)

This parent's view was not that the children's experiences in the book were unrealistic but that showing a wider range of experience might not necessarily be helpful:

There's been no particular attempt to hide anything from the child, which is probably the right thing to do to tell the child everything but it seems obviously the children are being brought up rather too quickly. They are not allowed to be children, they are having to think like little adults and have to make decisions as to whether they live with mum or whether they live with dad and they have to be very independent and street-wise at what seems to me to be a particularly young age. And also I think we don't give our children credit for being as grown up as they are. I think it is unfair to burden our children with some or the problems that Jacqueline Wilson seems to do that her heroes and heroines seem to burden their children with. But maybe when I look round at school where I work certainly 20 to 30% are experiencing that sort of background and that sort of parenting. So the books are perhaps doing something there. (5)

The parents with older children were more troubled about what children read, either because it did not reflect their real experiences or because it introduced confusing differences. These four parents all had slightly different perspectives, but the issue of reading for older children was thought to be more complex than for younger ones. Since these interviews were undertaken Jacqueline Wilson has become top of the most borrowed and bought lists and developed a public speaking profile as Children's Laureate. She has continued to write in contested areas. Her newest book, aimed at the teen market, is about a pregnant teenage heroine. It would be interesting to have heard these

parents' responses to it. It might also be interesting to further consider Zipes' (2000) view that the middle class white parent prefers the commodified children's literature, such as the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, where difficulties are safely left in the world of fantasy.

Windows on the world, creating empathy

One reason for encouraging children of any age to read is to open their minds to new possibilities and to help them develop empathy for the experiences of others. Apart from the comments about Jacqueline Wilson from one parent, most parents seemed open to their children reading whatever came from school, the library or bookshops. Apart from using books that explained real experiences to children, and encouraging children to read the books they had enjoyed in childhood themselves, most parents took a relaxed approach to books and read everything and anything that they came across. The choice initially of books they had read themselves in childhood can be seen as limiting, as this meant children were perpetually being redirected to the 'classics' and not necessarily being introduced to new writers unless they were marketed heavily. For example:

When I was a child I liked reading the Famous Five and all of them, they give you time on your own. As I got older I liked reading the Little Women stories, the whole set, I have read them all. I have got cut down versions of them ready for the children when they are older. (15)

Sharing what they enjoyed as children was part of the parents' pleasure in reading with their own children and was also linked to passing on attitudes and values. This is why one parent struggled with Jacqueline Wilson, feeling on safer ground with Enid Blyton and other well known writers:

I enjoy introducing them to books I read as a child and it's part of the pleasure of being a parent to revisit all those books that you read as a child and you

remember being introduced to. I enjoy doing that and introducing them to modern literature hasn't come easily to me. (5)

Books open up children's imagination, and create empathy and understanding of other people's lives. Parent 22, therefore used a book to help her son understand his classmates' backgrounds. Through this action she was also transmitting her own values of the importance of understanding the diversity of cultures in her neighbourhood. Another parent was also trying to be open to new experiences but then commented wryly on the paradox that is present when books are ostensibly chosen to open up a child's mind and then transmit the parent's own values:

I think it's about that thing I was saying with my mum, opening other worlds seeing how other people live. And I have to say that I am very right on as I try to find multicultural books because I think she ought to have that, this is the bit of me that goes in and not choosing a book because I like it but because I think she ought to have it. Books with people from different lands other faith books, Bible books I read to her. ... It's thinking about worlds that might not be opening otherwise but also helping her to see - my attitudes and values that's awful, that's not giving her the freedoms I was talking about. She will choose she's got very definite ideas. But I like to give her some of the traditional things as well because they've got tradition behind them - the fairy tales, with the happy endings. I also buy her comics ... even Barbie although I don't like it. (7)

Role models

Parents were asked to consider whether they found parents in books were role models, and if there were any with which they identified. This proved difficult for parents to do. Partly, this was because of the limited repertoire some parents read. It was also because as Tucker (1981) explains, in books aimed at older children, parents are largely absent.

They are in the background and may come to the rescue in the end, but are not the focus. Eight parents commented on this (1, 3, 4, 5, 14, 15, 18, 30), and as parent 5 said:

Parents are important but they are just never there.

However, when it came to books for younger children, four parents could identify with the mothers who seemed very busy (2, 13, 19, 31) but 10 thought that the parents and grandparents they saw in books were very stereotypical (8, 9, 12, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31). Some parents thought the mothers always seemed too down at heel and not smart enough. Another parent said that:

Books seem almost too old fashioned or they are stereotypical, dad washes the car ... (9)

or she thought books became self consciously politically correct:

It can look too p.c. or not reflect today's family situations and it can try to be everything to show what's politically correct not actual life. (9)

Other parents agreed that books can be very stereotypical in terms of gender roles. Although some authors, like Helen Oxenbury, were thought to picture life more realistically:

I came across one story - Helen Oxenbury - a series of stories - and in it one night mum is too tired to cook the tea, so dad says I'll take you out to a restaurant or pizza or something and I just thought that's quite nice, because for once it was just showing a mum who was too tired with something, so they went out to this

restaurant but it turned into a complete disaster. Which is a bit more like ... yes that's real. (25)

One parent (12), married to a farmer, said she disliked the way farmers are pictured in children's books but not the farms, and some parents pointed out the under-representation of black families in children's books. For example:

There is a total absence of Asian parents in books. In the absence of, or images of, black and particularly Asian parents, I tend to then go for animals that are completely, well no it doesn't matter what colour their skin is, so I tend to go for elephants particularly Indian elephants and we only ever use the Indian word for elephant. I use books where I can use Indian culturally relevant parents, I tend to pick stories if I haven't got pictures as well. (29)

Overall, parents thought that many children's books were stylised and did not always accord with real life:

You definitely seem to always have a two parent family with grandparents. (9)

In a lot of the stories you never see a haggard mum. They've done all the messy jobs and they've never got a smudge or a hair out of place. You feel exhausted at times and it's never portrayed in a book. (12)

This parent had not seen Shirley Hughes work, and enjoyed it when she came to look at the pictures in the last part (Part C) of the interview:

I'd like them to read these books, it shows children playing normal, like. I've never seen these books to be honest. (12)

However, whether books represent real life or not, it was clear that they had the potential to create an exchange between the parent, the page and the child. Parents were not passive in their relationships with print. Books were capable of enabling people to articulate their views on parenting. For example, three parents (6, 10, 11) commented on what was wrong with the Dursleys in the *Harry Potter* books by J. K. Rowling:

It is the way they treat their son as compared to the way they treat Harry. If you've got two people living with you most people would treat them in the same way. They spoil their son something rotten but they treat Harry rotten as though they've got to have him there but they don't really want him. In a case where a child is without parents you think they would be more supportive instead of knocking him down all the time giving him all the chores and treating him very nastily. (10)

They are the lowest of the low. (11)

They spoil their son atrociously, he is appalling a complete bully and they are mean, ruthless and horrid. (6)

Another parent (2) commented on what, in her view, made Mr and Mrs Weasley good parents. It was that Harry's school friend, Ron Weasley:

... turned out to be a well rounded boy. (2)

Another parent thought the family relationships in the Weasley household were fun:

It is funny to see the interplay between her and her husband and her children. (9)

Another parent (8) said she thought Homer Simpson from the television cartoon series was an encouragement because:

Although they do a lot of things wrong they try so hard. It was actually on Radio 4 at one point he was set as a good example. He is, although they make so many mistakes, they try so hard. That idea that trying so hard and loving them even though they're not perfect and you're not perfect that's what being a parent is.

Most parents seemed unaware of some of the more subliminal messages about parenting in some books, although one parent said:

*Some of the mothers that I really like, and it tends to be mothers, some of the ones that I really like tend not to appear much in the books. There's a book that was a favourite with my other children and is a favourite with H. It is, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and the mum is almost there but in the background, again it's sending Max off into this fantasy world of monsters, and it's still teatime and she let him go off into that. There is another one that is very similar and I can't think of it's name and I haven't got it now and I'd like to get it for H, and it's a book, I think, called *Albert Mapelbert* and the mother drops a plum in his mouth and a plum tree grows in the house because he's dropped the plum stone. And it's that idea of a mother doing a little something that then sends a child off into that world and is there at the end in a comforting supporting way, I suppose I'd like to be that sort of mother. (7)*

However she, like others, wanted more mothers in books to represent the realities of a contemporary world:

There's another mother comes to mind and again I can't think of her name, but it might be Mrs Potts the Plumber. It's a mother who is out working doing something unusual. She goes off in her headscarf doing her plumbing and there's no problem. I like that view of a strong mother, a mother who can do all sorts. On the other hand probably her house is all untidy and it is OK. I hate the view of the super mother. I hate it when we've got the mother who is washing up, yes dear, and everything is all neat in the house and it's that sort of mother I feel terribly inadequate against. I can't be that person. (7)

Another parent mentioned a book where a child had a secret life away from the parent, which experience she thought was important for children:

It's called The Man by Raymond Briggs and it's about a boy who woke up one night and found this little man had come to stay with him. He dresses him and finds things for him and he is awkward about things and he wonders what his parents are going to say when they discover he has come to stay with them. He stayed with the boy for about 3 or 4 days and it just tells what the little boy did to look after this little man and how the boy managed to hide it from his parents. This little man stays in the boy's bedroom and the boy goes downstairs and finds this pair of gloves and chops the top off and gives them to the little man and raids the fridge for things he wants to eat. He makes a bed up from things he got from downstairs and has to explain to his parents what he has done with these things or where they are and get more food and these sorts of things. They (the parents) are getting on with their lives and asking questions about what is missing they don't really know what the child is getting up to or what is going on. He is having fun with this little man and they are completely unaware of it yet this little man is living in their house. (10)

This parent was acknowledging that often books are there so that children can handle their feelings not just about the external world, but also about their need to have secrets from parents and feel superior and clever.

Returning to representations of real life, the parents commented on the fact that fathers in books tend to carry out stereotypical roles, washing cars, going to work, mending things and on the whole parents liked it when fathers were seen bathing children and playing with them. One father, a full-time parent, was delighted to have been given a book with a father in it with whom he could really identify:

I had a friend from the project and she bought J a present, a book called My Dad is Great, and it's the nicest book I've ever seen in my life. There was a problem with it in the sense that me and my partner had just separated and there was a mum included. I did have some issues about reading that to J. I thought it was important to J because we get on really well and I always praise his mummy up and she is a lovely woman but we are just not compatible. But it is a lovely book. To see a mother or a father in a good light is brilliant. This dad goes and picks his son out from school. He is shown as being taller than the other dads, but what this book shows is that he is standing on a box to make himself taller but his son isn't aware of that. His son sees his dad as being all encompassing, this magical being. His dad is doing what dads should do, showing they can project their image in a positive way. (16)

There appeared to be few books that parents could embrace in this kind of way, and often, the influence of parents in books is subliminal. Occasionally parents were concerned about the content of some children's books and made conscious choices which influenced the children. For example:

We read Postman Pat and I will say I like the characters in Postman Pat. They are all quite sociable ... I like that it's almost idyllic, a nice community and they don't argue. (14)

I am trying to guide them in the right directions, hoping they don't get into drugs and things like that. (12)

With younger children, parents set out find books to discuss real experiences and opportunities and challenges in life. Older children's reading was different, in that parents were more likely to be involved in knowing what their children were reading and discussing the content with them, rather than choosing the books. Until recently, there have been few books tackling the real issues with which many older children and younger adolescents engage. Those that are now available offer parents further opportunity for useful conversations with children about new experiences, challenges and risks.

Reading and parenting

For the families in this study, reading was embedded into family life and into parenting activities. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Sugarman, 1986: 30) suggested the following order for need satisfaction: physiological, well-being, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, self-actualisation. It is tempting to see reading and literature as separate from the first needs, and to belong with the kind of self-actualisation that may come through life experiences and education. However, this study showed that reading with children was an important activity at all levels of need. It could contribute to many aspects of a child's experiences of growing up, including physical care, a feeling of safety, and experiences of love and emotional warmth, irrespective of the parent's or carer's background. Reading could also develop emotional awareness and indeed self-actualisation in children and their parents.

The parents with higher levels of educational achievement themselves were the most articulate about the place of reading in their children's lives and proportionately made more comment on the educational value of the activity. These parents also probably provided the most reading opportunities for their children. However, all the parents showed reading to be naturally embedded into family life, important and meaningful, especially in respect of emotional closeness and attentiveness. An unemployed twenty year old parent, who had left school after GCSE said:

You pay attention and if they want to go to town you take them to town, if they want a quiet minute then let them have it instead of rushing around. If they bring a book, don't say 'No come back in five minute's, just sit down there and read it with them because you can't bring back that five minutes later, the child only knows the here and now. (17)

Another parent living in disadvantaged circumstances wrote:

It might not be every night but I do try and read every day. We don't live in an ideal world and there are times when life is going to be difficult but as long as you communicate with the child and explain it in words they understand and show them books if you can to suit their ability. (18)

The parent who could not afford ice cream during outings (27) found reading with the children worthwhile:

We get a book and each one turns a page, because I can't get them to read on their own. I do a page; M does a page, then L a page. That way their reading skills are getting better and the story gets exciting and they want to know what happens in the end. When they are in the shop, M tries to read the paper now.

Many parents spoke of reading every day or evening, loving books and helping their children learn. This kind of comment and commitment to children's reading permeated the whole sample of parents. This suggests that reading is an important dimension of parenting capacity in its own right. Additionally, reading adds to the enjoyment of family life and can be used to solve problems:

People in my family have a real thing about hating the dentists and I didn't want my kids growing up with the fear of the dentists so I got books out of the library and it was just about taking the child along and their experience ... I started with the book and that got us going. (25)

Additional benefits that parents mentioned related to imagination, and the restorative power of using books for fun, escape and adventure. The lifelong love of books comes from this associated pleasure of an activity with loved adults across the generations:

I have read to him since day one. When I was breast feeding I had him on my lap and read out loud, and my husband thought it was hilarious and I would say that I felt that I was having a calming time, also it was a very easy time to concentrate on things. Now he can choose books, bring them to me, or look on his own and it's almost a magical moment together and he's remembering it. I love seeing him interacting, even with dolls. He will be feeding things to the baby. He loves his books and I love them. I've always been a book person; it was instilled in me by my grandparents. It was my grandmother who instilled it in me, we used to go to the library and I can always remember it vividly, it was a real adventure. (14)

Main points

- Reading with a child was described as an integral part of parenting capacity.
- Parents used books to discuss experiences with younger children.

- Books provided opportunities to discuss wider issues with older children when suitable titles were available.
- Children and parents read books for the kinds of reasons articulated in children's literary studies.
- Emotional warmth, basic care, security and stability and attachment were closely linked to the pleasure of reading with a parent, whatever the book.
- Guidance, stimulation and safety issues were more enhanced if the content of the book was relevant.
- Role models for parents in book are few, parents are often portrayed stereotypically, and are often absent in books for older children.
- Reading with a child can enhance parenting capacities, especially empathy and the capacity to engage with a wider range of experiences.
- Where there were role models for parenting in children's books, parents could find them useful.

Summary

This chapter illustrates how parent-child reading was confirmed to be very important in many ways, social, emotional and psychological. The parents in this study, irrespective of culture and social-economic situation, valued the process of reading with children and engaged with it in diverse ways, finding a range of benefits from the activity. The parents were reading with their children because they thought it was useful preparation for school. They were also actively engaged in using books to discuss experiences. They thought that books contributed to widen children's understanding and preparedness for life but they also read with their children for pleasure.

Reading with a child is shown to be a vital part of parenting capacity. It is also possible to identify the contribution of parent-child reading to the six dimensions of parenting capacity in the Assessment Framework. The process of reading enhances the emotional

warmth, stability and security provided for children. The content of children's books has the potential to enhance the parents' negotiation of guidance and boundaries, ensuring safety and stimulation with their children. Therefore, it can be argued that the activity of reading with children should be explicitly identified in the parenting capacity dimensions of the Assessment Framework

Critically, reading is an activity where children and parents interact and have fun and pleasure together. Such interaction is essential for language, personality and relationship development. It can also affect the way the child constructs personal meaning. The psychologist Dorothy Rowe writes:

It seems then that the structure by which a person organizes his world originates in the baby's interaction not just with his physical world but, more importantly in his interaction with other people ... The interaction of human beings with one another seems to be more than just a pleasurable or useful activity. It seems to be a necessary condition of life, as necessary as eating or breathing.

(Rowe, 1988: 48-9)

Parents, children and others who are reading together are, consciously and unconsciously, interacting in an environment where the child's personal developmental opportunities are nurtured and enhanced.

The next chapter will consider how looking at pictures with parents also enriched their comments on the parenting capacity categories. Reading is demonstrably useful to enhance child-parent interaction. Additionally, the next chapter shows how using pictures to talk about parenting capacity enhanced a discussion between the researcher and some of the participants, and how this activity enriched the information already gathered about parenting capacity and reading with children.

Chapter 9

Shirley Hughes' illustrations: parents' views

What I remember is how vivid the illustrations were, then as now led by the ink lines of Shirley Hughes's particular rounded sense of children's faces. The little red and blue train Tom played with seemed to be the essence of a toy; the tents they made of the dark red blankets in their nursery involved me in all the sensations that go with containment and hiding; the smeech of treacle on Tom's face at teatime had in it in concentrated form the comedy of disorder, the hilarity of things being out of place.

(Spufford, 2002, *The Child that Books Built*: 49)

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the last part of the research interviews (Part C, Appendix 2) where two well known children's picture books were used to talk about parenting capacities with the participants, in order to assess the extent to which asking parents to comment on illustrations of the daily lives of children and their parents can facilitate useful conversations about parenting. The two books were *The Nursery Collection* and *Things I Like* by Shirley Hughes (1997, 2001). They were made available for parents to browse through, but some particular images had been photocopied on to sheets for discussion (see Appendix 2). The pictures were:

Picture 1: Three ladies are chatting on a bench, watching four babies in a buggy.

Picture 2: A mother is cooking while the telephone rings and the baby cries.

Picture 3: A family which consists of a mother, father and two small children. The parents are cleaning and then having a cup of tea together while the children play.

In this part of the research the parents were asked to comment on what they liked or did not like in the pictures, and to identify anything they thought resembled their own family life. This method meant parents could choose which pictures they liked, but also the parents' responses to three particular pictures could, at times, be compared and contrasted. Open questions were occasionally used to develop the discussion in the one to one interviews and the groups. In the groups the parents often prompted and responded to each other. There were two reasons for asking parents to respond to illustrations. The first was to create the opportunity to talk about the pictures with parents and to see the way the person's own inner world interacted with the Shirley Hughes' world. The second reason was to test the way an indirect approach to considering parenting might yield useful discussion in terms of parenting capacity.

The literature in education on picture books (for example, Tucker, 1981) identifies their value as a medium through which two people (usually parent and child) can interpret the world together. In this situation the parents were interpreting Shirley Hughes' world with a researcher, and sometimes other parents, in order to discuss parenting. Shirley Hughes' work was chosen because of her continuing popularity. It was also important to choose a picture book, both for its interpretative potential, and because a response to a picture book was less dependent on literacy.

This chapter first focuses on the accounts of five parents (1, 16, 17, 32, and 33) in order to illustrate the kind of responses this interviewing technique produced. These accounts summarise some of what others said, and particularly demonstrate the kind of narrative that is possible. That is followed by a discussion organised thematically, using the Assessment Framework parenting capacity dimensions again. This is to show how the parents, when talking about the pictures, shed further light on their conceptualisations of basic care, ensuring safety, emotional warmth, stimulation, guidance and boundaries, and stability. Finally additional parent initiated themes are discussed, because they emerged

strongly, and are about stereotypes and social exclusion, which has been a contextual issue and sub-theme of the study.

Pictures as a talking point

Parent 1, from sample 1, gave an account that showed the extent to which the pictures generated discussion. At the same time much of what she said about them related to parents across the whole sample. In particular, most of the parents responded to the cosiness of Shirley Hughes' work. Two parents (4, 26) had reservations that it was too *rosy and cosy* a picture of childhood and parenting. Parent 1 initially said that she liked the material because it gave a very good mix of scenes from family life, and showed warmth in the family with evident love and caring. She said:

It's not just mothers there are fathers. The father is sitting there drying the baby in the bathroom and things. She shows realistic ones as well and the mother's cooking and they are all pulling at her skirts and she looks frazzled, but even then there's feeling of love and warmth in the family. You feel that even though she's exasperated and she wants to do one thing and there's one child pulling at her leg and one child wanting a cuddle and there are cats and dogs and she is still. It's a very warm secure family and you get that with all her pictures that all the children are loved.

However she also sounded a note of caution, suggesting that the pictures carried stereotyped images which might offend or annoy some parents:

I don't know if some people might feel excluded from pictures like that. In most pictures you get the feeling that there's a mother and a father and a little boy and a little girl and although she includes other races and everything, it is very white, very middle class. There's a nice big garden there's a sandpit. My children liked it.

I don't know whether in other families the children look at it and think this is completely stupid, I don't know anything like this ... I don't think she's ever done pictures set in a modern estate. The majority of people probably do live in modern houses, so again, how realistic is it?

She also commented on the old fashioned feel of the life-style shown:

She does cover a wide variety, the swimming pool, playing in the street. I mean she's got the children all sort of playing here which is lovely but actually reminds me of books when I was back in the 50s, 60s sort of things. I would be terrified to have them playing in this street out here because you would be too scared. I don't mean that someone is going to run off with them I mean a car's going to come and knock them flying, that's what scares me.

She was prescient in suggesting that these pictures would provoke some negative reactions, and they did. Parents 32 and 33, who both identified that they struggled in their community environment reacted strongly saying that:

I wish it was the 70's again, it was safer, what is it going to be like when my kids are teenagers? I am worried all the time, like it is now ... you can't even stand near the kerb without a car coming up. (32)

In the 70s you could leave your child outside a shop in a pram and you can't do that now. You could leave your house unlocked; now you wouldn't have a home to come back to ... You used to be able to let your child run in front of you ... you can't do that now, because someone would come and get them. (33)

So, the pictures certainly aroused a response, although it was not always positive. The pictures of women in saris chatting also brought a criticism of Asian and especially Muslim families from parents 32 and 33.

They wear these things, is it Muslims? They have these things with their nose just peeking out; it's enough to scare you to death. (32)

When some parents saw the pictures, they responded in more concrete detail around aspects of parenting and parenting capacity. This was particularly true of the less literate and less educated participants. One of the fathers found the pictures quite emotional. First, he identified with the fathers he found in the books and the domestic scenes:

To me that (bathtime) is a very important time, as a man it is very easy to not have that time and not get involved. Getting an environment where the kids are happy you can bond just as easily as a mother. (16)

However, seeing the grandparents in the pictures stirred up some issues, because his parents were *better* with his child than they were with him, and he found that difficult:

It really is nice to see my parents doing what they should have done. They are doing it for themselves. I think it's about righting wrongs. They are not to blame, it's the old world. I don't think enough emphasis is placed on grandparents and the part they play.

He did not have access to his own grandparents because of family disagreements over alcoholism and deaths, which he felt was a loss. Aged 33 with parents of 54, he thought the grandparents portrayed were very *stereotypical* and *archetypally grey*. He also

commented on the children playing in the street, and the mothers, which stirred up some strong feeling for him about his mother and his history:

I played in the street. We were certainly working class living in rented accommodation on this side of the river. This is South side and it's always been community minded. We moved to the other side when they bought their own house and you lost touch. It's a sad picture, nostalgic. I'm not happy with this section at all. I find it upsetting. In this picture, the woman is down, the dogs down, she's got a crying baby in her arms, and she's downtrodden. That's my mum with no support, trying to cope and making a bloody bad job of it. Even the teddy looks really miserable. I don't know if Shirley Hughes has done it deliberately.

This parent brought much of himself to the way he saw the pictures, and so did another parent, who had struggled when asked questions, but became much more expansive when looking at the books and began to describe in more detail her own family situation:

That reminds me of bathtime. I put them both in together now, they share everything. They are both boys, there's 14 months between them, hardly anything between them and they have got the same personalities and everything, and they both love a bath. We have to take all the water out and all the toys before they'll get out. Yes that's realistic that one. And that, playing in the cot, that's my two and kisses and cuddles, they are forever kissing and cuddling each other, and that one escaping. They escape out of the front door and the back door and I have to keep all the gate is tied up to stop them getting out. They don't really have any other kids to play with either then coming here because all my family's grown up. They are all in school my two are the only babies in the family at the moment ...

that reminds me of my dad and my oldest on going to town on a Saturday afternoon, carrying on his shoulders. (17)

She said more about her children's daily routines in this part of the interview than at any other time. The detail in the pictures led to some detailed descriptions, for example:

I'm the middle. My brother is the oldest. He's married to an older woman, she's got kids and my sister has just left school. She has just sat her exams and she's got a job with social services when she leaves school, a modern apprenticeship. That is one as well, he's gone and got his crayons out and his paper and stuff out, that reminds me of O as well, because he's sitting down, if you've got a dog, he'll sit down and cuddle the dog and then go to sleep together. (17)

The pictures evoked both happy and stressful memories for several of the participants. As a tool for discussion, and to draw out more information about the parents' views on parenting, they worked well. The parents used the illustrations to compare their own lives with what they saw. As a tool for reminiscence and therapeutic work with parents, they would have also been effective, as they triggered emotional and felt responses in a way the direct questioning did not. The parents' responses to the illustrations led to some other perspectives on the dimensions of parenting capacity. Basic care and safety are combined for the purpose of this next section. This is because many of the comments about safety relate to Hughes' pictures of basic care, as her books are largely about domestic scenes such as: cooking, bathtimes, walks in parks, shopping, caring for pets.

Basic care and ensuring safety

Using the pictures as a discussion starter produced more detailed information from the parents about their ideas on basic care. A grandmother summarised, what many of the parents liked in the ordinariness of the scenes, the fact that basic care can be fun:

I like the variety of the children, and they are not just small, they've got the variety of ages and colour of the children and the daily things that go on every day; it's not a fancy book really. It's true to life. There is everything that we can make interesting. I think that's what she is showing. You don't have to be boring it can be fun. I didn't see anything I didn't like really: the untidiness and lots of children; the grandparents being there and the dads doing things. There the mum is trying to do several things at once. Cook the dinner, hold a crying baby, and answer the phone. It's very familiar. (19)

The parents who had already said they identified with busy mothers in children's books found their lives reflected in the pictures:

Busy, busy everything happening at once. Although my children are past that stage, it is the phone ringing whilst something's happening. I hope that my children would feel that they have the same sort of comfort in their lives as these children have. Certainly the messiness and the sort of realism fits with me. We don't live in a pristine house. I hope that my children are doing as well. (2)

The illustrations also provided a response about safety in the home which had not emerged in other data:

I would say that was me, that would be me standing there with one baby on the one arm and the other one sort of round my legs, probably knowing that she shouldn't be there but just because she's waiting for her tea she's like hoovering, and there's the pot boiling over and that's when the phone rings and it's just like, yes that was me. I probably was doing stuff that I would know ideally I shouldn't have a baby on my hip when I'm standing over the cooker, cos they might just ...

but I'd rather have the baby on my hip because it's better than having them on the floor screaming at me. I can't deal with the screaming, I'd rather take the risk as it were of having baby here and stirring tea and trying to get food in them as soon as possible, to shut them up or what have you. That's for me quite real because it's not ideal, but that's life. (25)

For some, a slight element of risk was acceptable, but others felt that the happy chaos of Hughes' households was neither realistic nor desirable:

They seem to be terribly idealistic. This is the theme here that the parenting shown is disorganised and not quite right and she seemed to promote such wonderful situation. You've got 2 children emptying a rubbish bin and I know that is the sort of thing that I've gone absolutely ballistic about if my children started doing that. Yes it's too messy for me. Yes I suppose as a parent I never let my children make that sort of mess. That's not to say that they weren't allowed to do normal activities, but I'm more structured. (5)

Several of the parents were very critical of a mother having her children in the kitchen and trying to cook with them present. For example:

I never think it's a good idea to cook whilst children are around. I always try to do mine in the evening so that it's all done and it goes in the oven or the cooker just goes straight on so that I have time for the children, so I'm not keen on that picture. (11)

For this parent from sample 1, the picture shows a parent who is too disorganised.

Parents 19 and 21 agreed:

She should put the baby in the play pen; cook the tea when they are not around so much. Get the dog out for a start. Concentrate on either looking after the children or cooking the tea. (19)

I don't like the children in the kitchen while she is cooking. (21)

The mothers chatting on the bench came in for some adverse comment too. Despite the fact that many parents acknowledged the pressures of trying to do several things at once, there was a strong view that children, who are playing, need more supervision and active adult involvement than is evident in the pictures:

That boy's being a bit spiteful isn't he? They are chatting and have dumped the babies ... they should have been playing with the babies in the park instead of chatting themselves. That one would want to go on the swings and that. Perhaps these are babies who could sit in the pushchair. But that one, you would want to look after it, put it on the slide. Some of these children are too young to be playing in the street. (19)

This is the most usual response to this kind of picture, although parent 28 liked the babies in the buggy as they reminded her of her own four young children. Most parents said they thought the parents in the pictures should be more focused on the children's needs:

I think it's nice to have a group of mums around so that the children have got somebody to play with, but I don't like chatting with someone if a child is there and wanting to play. If a friend wants to come round and chat then they have to come round in the evening and that sort of thing. (9)

This need to be vigilant and focused was linked to the greatest fear many parents had, which was of a child wandering off or being snatched away by a stranger. Parent 14 voiced the changes in society most clearly:

Yes, I mean society these days isn't safe like it was in their era, when you could let a child wander round a bit. I certainly wouldn't let my child wander or be out of my sight.

And this exchange happened with another parent:

Parent 31: *I am not very happy with that bit.*

Interviewer: *What don't you like?*

Parent 31: *I will tell my kids not to talk to somebody they don't know. You never know do you? If I can't see him then that is it, I panic straight away.*

Parents 32 and 33 were particularly concerned about their environment and ensuring their children's safety:

Interviewer: *That would be risky round C?*

Parent 32: *Yes they could just pick your kid and go. They've already had a bloke, he's bent. He tried to get 11 year olds at school and down our street as well. Ours are that age as well.*

Interviewer: *You've got to know where your children are?*

Parent 32: *Yes, you can't even stand on the kerb without a car going up the kerb. They are on the path and the car is coming round. The other day, this car came round and I had to push him to one side.*

Parent 33: *You would not let your baby out of doors and out on the path and you wouldn't put a bed near a window either or things like that.*

This sort of view, that the world has changed since the carefree days of parenting pictured by Hughes, crossed socio-economic, age, cultural and gender groupings. No other parents had the same level of concern about their neighbourhood as parents 32 and 33, but Shirley Hughes was still often deemed lacking in the health and safety department:

I mean who in their right mind would leave two children outside one building with a pile of rocks with bare feet and a child sitting on the probably wet grass ?... The children are doing too many messy things and the world is too idealised and the situations are impractical. It is too comfortable, too messy, and too happy. Not enough supervision or attention to safety and hygiene. (5)

Some of the parents commented that there should be books that show children the dangers in the world:

*They're not bothered about being lost. Do you know what I mean?
My kids say they can't get lost. I know my name and my address, I'll find a policeman. That's how confident she is, right, and it's a case of look ... I've had to say to her, that this policeman that you find may not even be a policeman. She can't get beyond that. What I am saying that what she needs is a shock. (26)*

It's a nightmare. (27)

While the pictures were seen as nice and colourful, on the whole there was considered to be insufficient attention to danger and risks:

Yes they are nice and colourful. They do what children do. The bath looks hot to me. Health and safety again! (19).

This small sample of twenty-first century parents appeared to be definitely risk averse and very health and safety conscious. They were lively in their responses to the pictures and sometimes more forthright when responding to something concrete, for example the pictures of pets.

There are many pets in the illustrations in Shirley Hughes' books: puppies, kittens and dogs and cats are very much part of the families. This also provoked considerable comment about the pets and children mix. One parent had pets in the home and thought they were good for children:

There are lot of animals as well which I think is nice and we are a family that quite enjoys pets and things. (4)

But another parent was not impressed:

There's not one of these pictures where a child is unhappy. There's a picture of a child cuddling a kitten, and you just feel the warmth and pleasure and happiness associated with that contact that she's having with the kittens. No, no worry about having five kittens in the house and leaving your child alone with them. It makes the mind boggle really. (5)

Group 1 at family support project 3 were divided:

We had dogs when we were children; I think it's good for children to play with animals. (21)

I don't really like that. I think it's important that they know what animals are, and go to the zoo and that sort of thing. (22)

Others thought much more care should be taken with animals and children sharing living space:

We can't have cats anyway because we are both allergic to them. That looks like neglect isn't it, that? The poor old dog looks neglected. The dog knows where it stands and I know where I stand with the dog. I treat my dog very differently, one command and that is done. I couldn't have a dog that was wild, if you know what I mean. You never know with the kids. Other than that my dog will sit there like that and my kids sit on his back, he is a big dog, and they sit on his back and he will happily walk around with them. The kids can take him for a walk and if he sees a cat he won't chase it. (31)

It's like that. My dog wouldn't do that and he doesn't pull me ... I'm the boss. My children go behind me. (30)

The issue of pets in households has become higher profile recently, and a section on pets and their potential dangerousness is included in foster carers' home safety documents. These parents wanted to ensure that pets were properly cared for, and that they did not harm the children in any way through causing allergy or being too wild. The comments were spontaneously made in response to the pictures and provided an interesting snapshot of some possible views on this issue. The parents showed a willingness to take responsibility for health and safety issues around animals, and were critical of the laissez-faire romantic approach in the picture books.

Emotional warmth and stability

This was the area where most parents liked Shirley Hughes' portrayal of families:

The children seen happy and there is a sense of comfort and love. There is warmth in the pictures and happiness. (2)

I think they are very descriptive of expressions and an overall picture of what's going on, and what's going on in people's minds and such like. There are all sorts of things in there. It's evening, they've had a lovely day there are all sorts of toys out in the garden, and yet there are other things. (4)

One parent (5) criticised them for, *too much happiness*, but another parent thought that this kind of picture book has a place:

There's one here with a child in a bouncer and you can remember your own child doing it. He's bouncing in bed. ... I suppose life isn't happy all the time. But I suppose when you are reading a story especially at bedtime you want them to go to bed with positive thoughts. (10)

Parents across the samples demonstrated empathy with the warmth of the homely scenes and were particularly positive about the way children related to each other in the pictures, which they thought was the kind of interaction between brothers, sisters and friends that they liked to see. Several parents commented on the happy closeness in the pictures:

That reminds me of bathtime. I put them both in together now, they share everything. They are both boys, there's 14 months between them, hardly anything between them and they have got the same personalities and everything, and they both love a bath. We have to take all the water out and all the toys before they'll get out. (12)

Emotional warmth created through physical contact, shared activities, bathtimes, bedtimes, and mealtimes, as portrayed in the Hughes' illustrations, was usually liked and seen as familiar and reassuring. In their earlier responses to questions about reading with children, the parents identified sharing books with closeness, emotional warmth, quality and quiet time to be with, and listen to children. Parents on the whole liked the idea of cosy and happy books for bedtime and ending the day. However at other times they wanted to be more proactive than the parents they saw in the picture books, which brings us to stimulation.

Stimulation

The parents in the study, on the whole, thought that the parents in the illustrations were more relaxed than they themselves could be about allowing children certain kinds of freedom. They also thought the parental role in supervising and providing play activity should be a more active one than that depicted by Shirley Hughes:

The thing that strikes me an awful lot about these books is that the parents aren't in the pictures a lot. You've got the image of a child with a dog. Again you've got the image of a child running through the park. If that was mine I would be running through the leaves again. Again you've got the child playing football while they are watching. I recognise that one and I try not to do that. That is such a negative image, the children sitting in their buggies. They haven't even got a toy that really annoys me. There isn't any stimulation This picture here with mum with 3 million things going on... I avoid that like the plague because that reminds me of my mum saying, 'I'm busy' or 'I'm cooking'. If we are doing dinner, O helps me. If we are doing the washing up, he has his chair and he stands on it and he helps me. I'm quite lucky I've got quite a large kitchen and I've never had him hanging on me when I'm on the phone. (14)

The illustration of the mother preoccupied with cooking was often criticised, and in general, the view was that the children were not being given enough parental time and attention. Other parents commented on this, saying that they preferred to set time aside to provide stimulating activities for their children. The parents thought that adults taking a child somewhere to play and leaving them to get on with it were neglectful. They were not keeping children safe or offering stimulation:

There was one picture in there where they were at the park and the women were chatting and the children were left in their prams. They was having a good time chatting and the children was just left alone. That isn't too nice, especially if they go somewhere where children are allowed to play. (20)

The majority view was that active and stimulating, involved, parenting was desirable, and that joining in with children's activities is better than passively watching. Inattention, or adults talking and ignoring children, was seen as a failure of child-centredness. Many parents thought focusing on one task at once was better practice, but maybe the parents who liked that image can handle complexity more easily. For example:

She's obviously a slightly harassed lady, she's got these kids and pets and things and she's feeling a bit overwrought. You can tell by looking around that she's an active mum. She's got the magnetic letters on the fridge and the kids pictures are up and teddy's got a little dish having something to eat and she's trying to show them something while she's cooking. She just looks a nice mum. (3)

So, while there was a concern about safety and the desirability of the laid back approach to parenting in the books, nonetheless the warmth of the pictures was enjoyed by most people. However, the comment about the mother cooking being *a nice lady* along with other comments where a parent positively identified with the busy mother contrast

sharply with the view of parents who saw a harassed, downtrodden, incompetent mother in exactly the same picture. Sometimes therefore, it seemed that showing the parents pictures could reveal as much about their aspirations as parents, their experiences and inner worlds, of as it did about the illustration. It was also interesting that for some parents (for example, 9 and 14) there seemed to be no place for the child's world to be separate from the adult world and the safety of parental attentiveness.

Guidance and boundaries

While the parents raised issues about guidance and boundaries in response to part B of the research instrument, their concerns about discipline were not reflected much in the comments on the illustrations. Much of what they had to say about boundaries has already been discussed under the heading ensuring safety. It is also the case that the pictures chosen for discussion and the Shirley Hughes books were not portraying parents guiding children.

However, in their earlier comments on discipline, many of the parents had suggested that they had themselves experienced strictness; therefore it was a little surprising to find that what might have been considered as child-centred in Shirley Hughes' world was often seen as laissez-faire, and even a little neglectful. Again, the idealism in the pictures was compared with the realities of expecting certain kinds of behaviour from children, and teaching the kind of behaviour you want to see internalised by children. For example:

You've got 2 children emptying rubbish bins ... that situation never really happens in reality. If you were to put that number of children of that particular age group together you would be asking for war. (5)

There were no pictures in these books of parents attempting to settle quarrels, or teaching a child to improve their behaviour, so there were fewer comments about this

dimension of parenting. This compares with the comments presented in Chapter 6 where the intergenerational issues of parenting revealed much concern with guidance and boundaries and stability. In reflecting on these pictures, the main guidance and boundary issues that emerged are the ones about safety. A different book would have been needed to explore other aspects of this dimension through illustrations.

Socio-economic security may also have affected the parents' responses to the pictures. For the majority, these pictures showed a safe, easygoing, middle class world which has gone, or perhaps never existed for many of the research participants. Those who had enjoyed a secure and relaxed childhood, or who were very comfortable in the present, were more at ease with the nostalgia and the relaxed attitude to parenting. Others thought that the pictures did not reflect their struggles with a tougher world. For example parents 32 and 33 explained that their local park was unsafe for children as it was littered with rubbish, including needles from drug users.

In contrast, parents liked the way Hughes conveys family warmth, closeness, fun and pleasure, especially between family members across the generations. Homely bedtime and bathtime scenes were liked, *even though we don't use a tin bath* (8). Simple human pleasures could be identified with. Some parents, for example 2, 3 and 25, were more prepared to identify with some muddle and chaos in child rearing. Possibly, for poorer parents, images of chaos were images of a defeat they would resist.

In general, the exercise demonstrated the efficacy of picture books to provoke discussion. Rarely will parents scrutinise the illustrations in the way this research asked parents to, and in a particular context: discussing parenting capacity. However they all appeared to enjoy this part of the interview. As part of assessing parenting experiences or parenting capacity, this technique could be a valuable tool. The next section, therefore, considers the additional themes that the parents raised from browsing through the pictures. The

ideas are grouped under the heading stereotypes and social exclusion. This is because the strongest message emerging from responding to some of the illustrations was that, life isn't like that anymore and, that the portrayal of stereotypical families excludes many people.

Stereotypes and social exclusion

Motherhood

First, the parents thought that there were assumptions in the books about mothers on the whole being wives and carers. The women in the sample thought that this did not represent the different ways motherhood could now be approached. One parent, committed to full-time motherhood at home, thought that the mothers were not glamorous enough:

The pictures of the mums in there are very homely looking and the fathers as well.

The only thing I don't like is they are not very glamorous. They are about parenting in days gone by. (8)

A parent who had grown up children, a small child, a new relationship, and a job expressed the view about stereotypes of mothers in children's books very fully. For her being a mother involved complex roles and choices which many picture books do not convey:

One of the things I don't like is that it seems like mum is the one at home and dad is the one at work and although dad helps mum with stuff at home it's very much the stuff at home and I think that would be quite difficult for my little one who knows that I'm not always there in the kitchen cooking. There are lots of pictures of cooking and I have to say that if I can get things out of a packet it's easier. It doesn't mean that I don't cook and I do cook but this is a very particular image of

*a mother here in an apron with the children and the animals round her feet,
sweating over a hot stove ... there's never a picture of mum with a glass of brandy
in her hand! (7)*

However there was some identification with the struggling to do it all mother which was the reality for some parents:

*It's true to being a mum isn't it? Trying to do five jobs at the same time and a
dog, I can relate to that one. It relates to the business. (18)*

The topics of gender roles and single parenthood were also raised.

Gender roles

Shirley Hughes was one of the first illustrators to show fathers taking an active part in basic care. Usually this was seen as positive, for example:

*I like the pictures of dad doing the baths and that sort of thing, that's what we do
in this house and so I think that's a good thing. (8)*

However, several parents thought that the roles taken by fathers were pretty stereotypical:

*There you've got a dad with the little girl and the mum is in the swimming pool.
The dad is washing the car, that's very stereotypical isn't it? ... A bit of Hoovering
and a bit of bathing and taking children for walks (9)*

Parents thought that it was good that roles could be shared more:

There are a lot of men now who look after the children while the mum goes to work. Years ago that would never have happened. It's nice to see it nowadays.

(20)

One of the grandmothers was glad to see fathers doing more but was not comfortable with the idea of men bathing children:

I wouldn't like it; they do it more these days. I wouldn't feel comfortable with a man bathing the children. (19)

All in all, there was awareness and appreciation of changing roles for men and women, and an understanding that there was now a more complex and diverse set of social circumstances than shown in these picture books. This understanding carried over to the parents' views on grandparents.

Grandparents

Parent 16, who suggested that the grandparents in the pictures were *archetypally grey*, was not the only one to challenge this as a stereotypical and old fashioned perception. A parent with affluent in-laws thought maybe Helen Oxenbury's books were better. She said:

They don't quite fit into this stereotype of the elderly grey and particularly the ones she sees all the time, my husbands' parents. They are always jetting off all over the world and his mum is a bit flashy and their house is terribly house-proud and much smarter than anything I have and she has designer clothes. (7)

Parents liked the fact that grandparents are present in the books. Seven commented on the important role of grandparents, and thought children spending time with

grandparents was good. Others commented that it was not something their children had much opportunity to do. But they did think there were nice images of children being with other adults, having good relationships other than with parents. Two parents lived a long way from their families of origin, which in some ways they saw as positive, as they had backgrounds from which they wished to distance themselves. At the same time they were aware of a sense of loss:

It's what we never 'ad, we never 'ad, my grandparents. They moved miles away, we never saw them. When we went to schools and saw grannies, what's a granny? I didn't even know. (26)

I didn't see my Granny 'til I was 5. But for my parents they could identify with her. We couldn't. Like now the parents are up in my house. In my house I've got a picture of her and I say she's watching yer come on say good morning to yer nana. She can see them what they are like. (27)

The pictures could remind parents of what they did not have, and these two parents said that the messages carried in the books did not touch their experiences. Although they were positive about the idea of children having relationships with other adults, life was more complex for them:

Life isn't that simple. Life is quite simple in a lot of these stories. It's like there's mum and there's dad and there's granny and there's all these friends and so on and actually life isn't that simple for a lot of kids is it? (26)

Grandparents if they are around may be a long way away and people may have died and dads have come and gone and things like that and I don't find many stories until they get older you can find these, my eldest is getting into some of

those kind of stories now and is completely confused by them because she doesn't really understand all the things that are going on. (27)

Similar observations applied to multicultural representation in books.

Multicultural representation

One parent, a teacher, was particularly clear that she thought that just increasing the ethnic representation in books *here and there* was only political correctness. She commented that despite token changes the stereotypical values remain:

Again, there isn't enough variety of perspective for this person: there are stereotypical and idealised family patterns shown. Well you can take any picture and you can find an absolute balance of the different ethnic origins. It does seem to be very much, you could look at a picture, these look like two mums with three children either going to or on the way back from school. You wouldn't know if they were happily married or single parents or child minders or quite what. I think it rather gives the impression of mum and dad. It just strikes you as beingYes it does still seem old fashioned family values. (9)

Her point was that just changing ethnic representation is tokenistic if the whole ethos of a book does not change, but another parent (2) felt that this was a positive step:

I like the fact that it's the dad in it, the non-sexist attitude and the racial mixture – black, Asian people as well and that it is depicting real life. The three ladies are chatting on the bench and the children are getting on with what they want to do.

A parent (29), who described her own ethnic origin as Asian and Hindu, said *there are too few books with Asian parents, nearly total absence* and added that:

In the absence of culturally relevant parents, I tend to pick stories. If I haven't got pictures of black and particularly Asians I tend then to go for animals.

The pictures generated some negative comments, which are probably not surprising given the disadvantages some parents said their children were experiencing:

Parent 32: *I've noticed that he won't play with any black kids.*

Parent 33: *Perhaps he's not used to them.*

Parent 32: *If you go to Manchester, you get whole families.*

Parent 33: *S. (the town) is run by Asians, I just stands there and look at them we always make a point and say hello.*

Parent 32: *A. thinks that they need a wash.*

Parent 33: *It's everywhere you go. There are Muslims and ones in saris and they are everywhere.*

Single parents

The single parents reacted strongly to what they identified as stereotypical families and values. One parent said:

I do like the writing but I don't like the illustrations. (26)

She and her friend commented on the fact that there was no father in their homes to do the Hoovering, and that the children had to help:

It's not off the wall, but in reality it wouldn't happen in my house. My children might do that. (26)

Yes M and D hold the Hoover. M and C would be Hoovering. (27)

However the women were also wary of the messages in more modern books and fairy tales, and aware too that everything written is about heterosexuals and that step-parents get a bad press:

I think as a parent you've got to be on the ball as well. You've got to read it yourself and see what it teaches them. Do you know what I mean? You've got to be aware what images you are sending out. I'm a single parent in a relationship and it's men and women but it doesn't always go like that. Do you know what I mean? You read fairy tales it's just man and woman, the prince and the wicked step-mother too. (26)

It was not just the women who saw the lack of representation of single parents, and the idealism of the pictures. A father said:

You get a picture; this is the image that I really like, mum and dad cleaning the kids contented. That is idealism. As a single parent, I do all of this every other week. When we are together, I did most of this. I suppose I am a modern man, I do all of these things. You set an example. We can clean, men shouldn't be any different to women. I feel that it is important that we break down these barriers. We move to the picture below. My son is an only child, so I'm not able to see that two children can be happy sitting alone while their parents are reading the papers. I've got the Internet but I will not use it while my son is in the room. I wait until he has gone to bed. Unfortunately you have got to spend all your time with them whether you like it or not. You grow to like it. Again couple of nice pictures, the dad is tidying up while the mum is putting the children to bed. Not too happy because from the evidence that I have read it suggests that if a dad has got very

limited time, always find time to read a story. All the evidence suggests that it is important that dad does it (31).

The picture book session was therefore capable of drawing out additional insights from the parents on parenting capacity. The content of the Shirley Hughes pictures also brought out the differences between some of the stereotypes in children's literature and the lived realities of today's parents.

This chapter closes with a final example, a father who left school at 15 to support the mother of his children, not very literate, but the main carer for three children. His responses are given in more detail here to illustrate that sharing a picture book with a young male parent was a useful way to talk about his experiences of being a parent. First he talked about shared parenting, then pet management, and then about basic care:

Parent 31: *Yes, well we take it in turns really. We share all the tasks. But no I would not have the kitchen looking like that, definitely not.*

Interviewer: *Where would they be, in the other room?*

Parent 31: *Oh definitely, I won't have the dog in there neither. My dog goes outside.*

Interviewer: *But you wouldn't have the kids in the kitchen like that?*

Parent 31: *No, definitely not. I wouldn't have my kids in there when I am cooking anyway.*

On bathtime, the pictures brought out detail about the routine in the family:

Parent 31: *But even if I had to ... leave J in the bath ... he comes. If I had to go and put the baby in the bedroom, then it would be ... the bath would be there and the bedroom is there. But no ...*

Interviewer: *So what you are saying, to me it sounds like you do these things but these pictures aren't quite like you?*

Parent 31: *No. I know that if it was just me on my own there is no way I can leave J downstairs while I bath the other, because you don't know what he is getting up to downstairs. ... I don't like that image again. They are trashing their bedrooms. That is mine. Yes, well they both do it.*

Interviewer: *They both do it, do they?*

Parent 31: *Oh yes, definitely. We put her in the bedroom the other day while we bathed the baby; it takes two of us to bath the baby because he is so young. And they were playing in the bedroom, and her bedroom is always tidy in the morning, always has been, took her out of the bedroom and the next morning, got them both out of bed, and she had all her clothes on the floor and everything. ... I am very safety conscious, with J and K, girls I think... you shouldn't make them feel fragile, but in my eyes she will always be fragile.*

He talked about the play he observed in the pictures:

Yes, I like that. If we have got pots and pans, all the old ones the kids can play with them.

He also talked about his parents and other aspects of child management in a way that built up a richer picture of his family life than had been given earlier. For many of the parents the discussion around the picture book material, whether they liked it or disliked it, was rarely neutral, and there was considerable laughter and engagement at times with the material. The key points that emerged about parenting are listed next.

Main points

- The way children were playing and relating to each other was viewed warmly.

- Parents liked the every day comfort, homely scenes, love and emotional warmth.
- Some parents found the pictures irritatingly unreal.
- Children playing on the street or talking to strangers was seen as impossible now, there is too much traffic and a risk of children being lost.
- Some of the parenting was judged to be impractical and incompetent, with insufficient attention to home safety, especially in the kitchen.
- There was a mixed reaction to the presence of the animals in the home.
- The two grandmothers most enjoyed the nostalgic elements of the pictures.
- The grandparents in the pictures were welcomed, but seen to be stereotypes.
- The inclusion of Black or Asian parents and children was welcomed by most – but tokenistic representation was not enough.
- The ethnic minority parents in the sample were critical of a lack of reality in representation of their lives in the pictures.
- Some parents wanted more useful books that showed the realities of children's and parents' lives, and were inclusive of single parents and other groups.
- Overall, the representation of mothers and fathers was considered stereotypical; although it was good that fathers were visible.

Summary

These responses to one illustrator reflect the changing world of parenting, and show the power of pictures as a shared activity to trigger the parents' perspectives. The data shows how the parents responded, in rich and diverse ways, to the illustrations and often expanded on what they had said about parenting. Faced with visual images some commented in significantly more detail and more freely than before. There were also some contested areas and different interpretations as well as the basic consensus already identified.

Socio-economic circumstances affected the parents' responses to these pictures, and so did changing cultural contexts. These particular pictures represented, for most parents, a safer, more easygoing world, which has gone or never existed. Those who had enjoyed a secure childhood, and were comfortable in the present, could more easily tolerate the relaxed attitude to being parents and some nostalgia. The reaction of others was that the pictures did not reflect their struggles to be a good parent in what they saw a tougher world, for example, the parents who were concerned that the local park was unsafe. The extent to which society is perceived to have changed and the preoccupation with safety issues and risks of various kinds emerged strongly.

The main finding, from this section of the data, is the usefulness of the technique for ascertaining views, which can still be aligned with the Assessment Framework dimensions. As a technique it is easily replicable, and there are other children's books which might be used, depending on the topic chosen for exploration. Social workers, and all the other practitioners involved in child welfare, might undertake work with parents in family support projects, using children's literature to trigger discussions on a range of critical parenting topics. Fieldworkers could take books to parents' homes. It was on the whole fun, and the interactivity of looking at pictures together was a relaxing way to work for some parents who were less comfortable being asked questions however gently or indirectly. Where children were present, they also looked at the pictures and there would have also been scope for working with children and young people, with or without their parents.

This is the last chapter to present analysed data from the study. The next chapter will draw from the whole work and make connections between parenting capacity, reading with children, and social work with vulnerable children and their families in current policy contexts. It will explore some implications from the findings for child welfare practitioners.

Chapter 10

Parenting capacity, reading with children, social work with vulnerable children and their families: some connections.

Introduction

Traditional fairy stories end with the classic phrase 'and they all lived happily ever after' suggesting that 'by magic' all troubles can end well, while modern children's fiction is often more realistic. Despite the suggestion by some politicians that there are magic solutions for social policy, it will continue to be necessary to examine the best ways to support vulnerable children and their families. This study has explored the relationship between parenting capacity and parent-child reading. This chapter summarises the main findings from the study and outlines some of the implications for practice within contemporary policy contexts. It discusses the findings within three broad headings related to the research questions which were:

1. How are the measures of parenting capacity in the Assessment Framework viewed by parents?
2. Does this match with their current concerns?
3. How important to parents is the capacity to share books with a child?
4. What does this contribute to the capacity to parent?
5. What is the importance of this new dimension for social workers and other professionals in their practice?
6. How could this dimension inform social work practice with vulnerable children and their families in contemporary policy contexts?

The three areas for discussion are:

1. The parents' views of the relevance to them of the Assessment Framework parenting capacity dimensions (Questions 1 and 2).
2. The extent to which parent-child reading can be seen to contribute to assessing and building parents' capacity, and potentially enhance the understanding of the dimensions of the Assessment Framework (Questions 3 and 4).
3. The case for an additional dimension of parent-child reading, within the Assessment Framework, which can inform practice in contemporary policy contexts (Questions 5 and 6).

The parents' views of the relevance to them of the Assessment Framework parenting capacity dimensions.

This section sums up the parents' views in relation to the first two research questions. The outcome of the baseline survey (Appendix 6) suggested that the parents could identify with the broad Assessment Framework dimensions of parenting capacity. They also brought their own particular experiences and perspectives to their understandings of parenting in their situations, thus illustrating the usefulness of talking to parents (Chapters 6 and 7). Overall, the outcome from the whole sample of 33 parents confirms the value of studies that ask parents for their views, especially where a diversity of people are interviewed. While a sample of this size cannot be considered to represent all parents, nonetheless the parents have contributed a range of perspectives, in some depth, which illuminate parenting in contemporary contexts. These are now further discussed, using the Assessment Framework dimension headings, starting with basic care.

Basic care

The parents were not much preoccupied by basic care. All the families had enough to eat, were housed adequately, could present themselves and their children in a social situation well enough, and had access to reasonable health care. The main message from the parents was about flexibility in the way basic care is given nowadays. This might be important for social workers assessing families on such matters. First, it is increasingly the case that whatever other deficits may be present children may look well presented, and this alone may not indicate that they are safe or without other needs. Second, if they are smelly and physically neglected this is an increasingly minority occurrence, and significant enough to need prompt attention. Third, perhaps social workers should not confuse aspects of flexibility in parenting practices with parental failure to meet basic needs.

Ensuring safety

Most parents were reasonably confident about aspects of safety they could control, such as home safety. However there was a high level of concern about external threats such as danger from road traffic, children being snatched by strangers, or exposed to drugs. Several parents worried about losing control in their children's teenage years, and this was more urgent in poorer neighbourhoods where families were concerned about the impact of the behaviour of others or, as in one case, poor childcare in families living nearby. The literature on resilience (for example, Seden, 2002b) suggests that parents in some environments have an additional task in protecting their children from the impact of hazards in their communities. This adds to parental stress, and the most stressed parents were the two worried by the changes and deficits they perceived in their local community. Educational opportunity mattered to all, and there was a level of concern about bullying in schools for parents where the local situation was not, or they feared it was not, as positive and safe an as experience they would like for their children.

Some parents were particularly alive to, or concerned about, the dangers from children wandering off, becoming lost, or snatched away. Some of this was related to contemporary moral panics about stranger danger and the risks posed from schedule 1 offenders in communities. Parents were aware of the James Bulger case and the Soham murders. This has implications when known offenders are released into communities, and those who thought there was a schedule 1 offender in their neighbourhood were angry, not anxious. Social work and other practitioners will be aware that most maltreatment of children occurs within their families. However parental concerns about hazardous environments cannot be overlooked.

Emotional warmth

This was the most important topic for the parents and was understood (Chapter 5) in a nuanced and holistic way. It was important to the parents because they understood the links between emotional warmth and attachment. A shallow assessment of expressed warm feelings would be incongruous to the parents. None of the parents would have taken a 'love is enough' approach, but rather they considered that a whole range of actions demonstrated emotional warmth, especially calmness and commitment. They would expect a social worker to have a good understanding of children's emotional needs and to appreciate that emotional warmth is linked to stability and commitment over time.

Stimulation

Stimulation depends on adult commitment and in this study nearly every parent said committing time to children was critical for their development. The parents who took part in the study, except three, had the time largely because they had chosen not to, or could not, work full-time. Being time rich is an advantage in terms of offering stimulation to children which is based on the parental relationship but the working parents also sought to give time to their children. It is probably reasonable to suggest that when parents are seeking substitute care for their children with nurseries, nannies, childminders and others,

they would consider the opportunities for stimulation, so that their child might gain from the experience.

In relation to most of the dimensions, the parents' views were not overly influenced by their social situation. However, as discussed in Chapter 6, opportunity and social environments made a difference to the range of stimulating activities that children were offered. The family's socio-economic circumstances affected children's recreational and educational opportunities and therefore to some extent the quality of stimulation available to the children. Social worker awareness of the role of reading in stimulation can be helpful alongside work to improve other opportunities for stimulation in some neighbourhoods. The play and other activities for children provided by family support projects were valued by those parents who used them.

Guidance and boundaries

Parents were particularly interested in articulating how their parenting had changed, or was in transition, from previous generations. The overhang of Victorian values certainly influenced their own childhoods, if only in diminuendo. There was a clear shift to child-centredness, apparently less smacking, and more concern to work out ways of managing that avoided coercion and led children into making the desired choices (Chapter 7). The parents' varied perspectives were described under the headings of 'happy repeaters', 'repeating with a difference', 'deciding to be different' and 'handling differences within the family'. Social work assessments might need to take more account of how childhood experience impacts on present practice in this dimension. It was also noticeable that this area was one where the sample 2 parents were most open to help from the family support projects. One of the difficulties of being brought up too strictly was the tendency to overcompensate with your own children by being tentative about setting reasonable boundaries or by being uncomfortable about being authoritative.

Stability

Secure attachment and stability are linked ideas. In the end, stability can only be really measured over time, but it was apparent that for many children in the study, stability also came from a sense of connectedness to community and extended family as well as to their primary carers. Parents who lacked such ties found that friends or a family support project offered them valuable peer and practitioner inputs. Good economic circumstances were also important to stability, but the parents saw attachment and emotional connectedness as the key components to providing a stable and consistent environment. This put some pressure on the lone parents who recognised that they were often their child's only stability in a changing and, on occasions, economically precarious world. For these parents family support projects were key.

The relevance of the Assessment Framework to parents' concerns

To sum up, this first phase of the research identified that the Assessment Framework is relevant to the parents' own views and concerns about parenting capacity in their contemporary situations. The use of the Assessment Framework to analyse: the parents' narratives about what makes for a good enough parent; the changes they have made from their childhood experiences; and their current concerns, reinforces the value of the Assessment Framework for helping parents and practitioners to understand parenting. It also demonstrates the capacity of parents to be agents in assessing and judging what is good enough and what may be of concern. The evidence from this study is that when parents identified the relevance of the Assessment Framework dimensions to their own situations, there was broad agreement about overall relevance. Within that broad agreement, the parents presented a range of perspectives about what in their view constitutes good parenting.

The next phase of the research asked the parents to respond to two questions (3 and 4) about reading with children and parenting. The parents' responses revealed a richness of

activity and opinion, which opened up some new ways of understanding how the activity of reading with children is relevant to the Assessment Framework parenting capacity dimensions. The findings on parent-child reading are therefore explored in the next section, which examines how the parents' responses to research questions 3 and 4 about their reading with children enhance an understanding of parenting capacity within the Assessment Framework dimensions.

The extent to which parent-child reading can be seen to contribute to assessing and building parents' capacity, and potentially enhance an understanding of the dimensions of the Assessment Framework.

At the outset of the research it was anticipated, based on previous work (Seden, 2000b), that reading with children would be important in relation to children's moral, spiritual and imaginative development. However, as the findings emerged, it became apparent that reading with children can be an important component to every dimension of the Assessment Framework. Chapter 8 identified three aspects of reading with children that are important in relation to parenting capacity. These are:

- The process of parent-child reading.
- The content of the reading matter.
- Enhancing attachment and empathy through parent-child reading.

These three areas are now discussed in turn.

The process of parent-child reading

When parents were describing reading with their children, it was clear that the act of reading with a child, especially younger ones, was fundamentally embedded into the parent-child relationship and associated with shared cosy, nice, warm feelings and cuddles. Such was the universality of this link in the parents' minds, and its importance in their parenting

practice, that it seems reasonable to suggest that a child not having this experience regularly is experiencing a serious loss. This kind of interactive reading with a caring adult leads to attachment, emotional closeness, shared experiences and fun. Encouraging the kind of safe closeness that shared reading brings was important for all the parents in the study. Reading a book with a child who is interested, and then talking about it, was shown to be a good way to build a relationship in an unthreatening and indirect way, provided it is natural and unforced. Books cannot be 'prescribed' but they can be 'introduced' and the critical element is the shared pleasure of reading, and the talking about the book.

Another key aspect of reading with children, for the parents in the study, was the way it enabled them to create a quiet and close time for the family. This was especially so at the end of a busy day or where the parents had three or four children to care for. This quiet time both reduced stress for parents and enabled those with larger families to offer individual attention or calm group activity. It was a critical means by which parents enhanced their attachment to their children and built up warmth and togetherness. This strategy could be introduced to a family experiencing stress.

Several parents spoke of the pleasure of reading as learned from a parent or grandparent and wanted to pass on this pleasure to their own children. Reading could, in more difficult circumstances, create a feeling of safety and also provide some respite, relaxation and escape from daily realities. For a child for whom a particular book becomes special in itself, its continued presence as a part of a daily routine is a kind of stability. Reading with children could create a sense of intergenerational connectedness and potentially be employed to keep children in touch with their cultural, religious, linguistic, or ethnic heritage.

Further, familiar stories and reading routines can be part of the process of creating stability and the child's sense of security, order and safety in the world. Spufford notes (2002: 45) that we are a 'story-telling species' and:

*... language arranged in story allows prediction of what may happen in worlds of hazard and danger. This breakthrough of development means that events can be **represented**. The rules of the story are that it is repeated exactly as far as possible and becomes dependable as a way of ordering meanings.*

The process of reading therefore contributes to emotional stability and a sense of security, as well as to emotional warmth and aspects of basic care. The content of books, however, relates more to guidance and boundaries, ensuring safety and, particularly, stimulation.

The content of the reading matter

Parents in any situation can use books to stimulate their children's understanding of their own and other worlds, to help them develop new ideas, and understand the experiences and cultures of others. This is explored in Chapter 3 and also is described by Spufford (2002), whose isolated childhood meant that books were a lifeline to external worlds allowing him to escape into new worlds and experiment with identity:

Be an Egyptian child beside the Nile, be a rabbit on Watership Down, be a foundling so lonely in a mediaeval castle that the physical ache of it reaches out to you ... be one of a gang of London kids playing on a bomb site ... Be a king. Be a slave. Be Biggles.

(Spufford, 2002: 114)

Reading is therefore also a way of children exercising agency (James et al., 1998) through their choices of, and responses to, books.

Such vicarious experience can be powerful. It is, for example how white families might learn to imagine what it is like to be on the receiving end of racism (Tucker, 1981). Children can learn about other kinds of family and see other children wrestling with common feelings, such as resentment towards a sibling or anger towards a new baby when everyone else seems happy. The value of learning that you are not the only person in the world to experience such feelings is often reassuring, and moves the focus away from the individual to more universal understandings of human experience. At the same time a parent reading and talking about books with children gains a better understanding of their children's feelings and views. Often the parents were aware of this and were helping children to find books that enlarged their understanding and experiences.

The majority of parents in the study were open to their children engaging with new ideas through books, and were interested in the books they borrowed from school or from the family support project. However, there was some tendency for parents to read with children what was read to them unless the schools, libraries or children's project alerted them to new books. Unfortunately, as the parents identified, some of the available books remain somewhat limiting and more capable of reinforcing stereotypes than of opening up new worlds. Opportunities are lost to stimulate thinking, create a sense of identification and promote understanding, for example in respect of disabled children and also ethnic minority children.

It remains noticeable that disabled children are hardly represented in children's books as part of every day activities. For example, *Wheels* (Hughes, 1999) could have included a child in a wheelchair among the bikes and other items with wheels illustrated. *Starting School* (the Ahlbergs, 1988) is reasonably multicultural but in the wealth of illustrations

and topics there is no sign of any disabled child in the school community that is created. There seems to be either the self-conscious book, for example, *Don't Call Me Special*, (Thomas, 2001), or traditional books where the child is ill and recovers such as *The Secret Garden* (Compton Burnett, 1994), or where the disabled child is left behind, as in the folk tale *The Pied Piper*.

Similarly the ethnic representation in children's picture and story books is only just creeping beyond tokenism. *Starting School* by the Ahlbergs shows a multi-ethnic group of children, but they all celebrate Christmas. Diwali and other festivals occur in the time scale covered by the book but Hallowe'en is shown. The parents repeatedly said that in their experience, especially if they were from a particular minority group, that children's books tended to convey certain kinds of stereotypes and values.

Parents found books were useful for guidance, passing on family traditions and for conversation as part of their attempts to provide clear boundaries in a relaxed and authoritative way. While one parent queried whether exposing children to social realism in books was useful, the majority view was that children should be guided and helped to understand and deal with the challenges they would meet while growing up in a complex modern world. Two parents (26, 27) especially wanted books that dealt explicitly with the risks of *wandering off* and *talking to strangers*.

With younger children, books were read as guidance, for stimulation, for education and for socialisation. Most parents in the study, as noted in Chapter 6, wanted to guide younger children to reading that helped them to manage events such as going to the dentist, or starting school. They also wanted children to enjoy the books they had read as children themselves. Parents with older children were concerned, if not to choose their reading, certainly to know what was being read and discuss it. This was especially so for two parents (1, 5) if the book introduced topics such as drug use or domestic difficulties.

However there was very little attempt to control what children read, and parents seemed trusting of schools, book clubs and shops. Older children's books are increasingly being written to provide ways of thinking about modern social dilemmas. However the fantasy genre, like the fairy tale with young children, still retains an important role in dealing with core moral issues and the dilemmas of human existence.

Parents did not often see role models for themselves in children's books and commented that this was particularly the case in books for older children. The *Harry Potter* books (Rowling, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000) proved to be an exception and this may partially account for their popularity. Some parents liked the Weasley family (Harry's school friend's parents) and identified the deficiencies of the Dursley family who look after the orphaned Harry. A correspondent who read *Harry Potter: a social care perspective* (Seden 2002a), wrote:

As a single parent from a rather unconventional family, I found great resonances in what J. K. Rowling was saying about the relationships between children and their 'big people'.

(Personal communication, 2002)

The content of children's literature was, as anticipated at the outset of the study, relevant to stimulating children's spirituality and moral development. Writers have suggested that spirituality is innate in, and important to, children (Bradford, 1995; Hay and Nye 1995, 1996). The identifying features of children's spirituality are presented by Crompton (1996) as:

Aspirations, moral sensibility, creativity, love and friendship, response to natural and human beauty, scientific and artistic endeavour, appreciation and wonder at the natural world, intellectual achievement, physical activity, surmounting

suffering and persecution, selfless love, the quest for meaning and values by which to live.

(Crompton, 1996: 100)

Reading and talking over books is one of the ways children's spirituality in the widest sense can be enhanced, including the development of morality and values as described by Crompton. The content of books and the discussions that parents had with children were important in developing the child's ability to think, and also to articulate their ideas and ways of understanding the world. This all fostered the child's development and the parents' capacity to promote it. One or two parents were explicitly reading books with children that conveyed the parent's own world views to them.

Winnicott (1985) suggested that all children have a capacity for forming moral judgements. Piaget and Kohlberg theorised how this capacity develops in the growing child. There is a long tradition of splitting parents and other adult figures into the 'good' and the 'bad' in children's books. This provides the opportunity for the reader to identify with the extremes and come to their own judgements about what qualities and actions they admire or do not admire. Judging yourself against extremes is an important way to define your own values. Traditionally, pantomime and fairy stories have provided this experience, where the very bad and the very good are encountered and judged. This tradition continues in children's literature, particularly in science fiction. It is only by meeting the extremes that a range of moral positions can be met and accommodated. These kinds of books were still being read by parents and children in the study.

The parents in the study were concerned to keep children safe. In children's books, however, children often lead idealised lives. For example, setting off on adventures without parents is seen as fun. The parents most concerned about this aspect had been looking for books that helped children to be prepared for, and to have strategies for,

handling dangerous situations. Where there is no identified real danger, parents and children appear to have subliminal anxieties and fears about danger, often undefined. It is therefore not surprising that the works of J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman, which deal with the fight against dark and sometimes hidden powers, are successful with parents and children. Books also had an impact on the parents who read them, so that the parents' capacity to meet children's developmental needs, through entering the child's world, can be enhanced through reading with children. There is a particular connection to children's attachment and parental empathy.

Enhancing attachment and empathy through parent-child reading

The majority of parents said that the time they spent reading with their children was important in enhancing their children's attachment to them. Given the importance of attachments in children's lives, this aspect of the use of books with children was particularly significant, both in sustaining relationships and also as an aspect of stability. Many parents, and other adults involved in children's lives, will have had the experience of having to read the same book over and over to a child because it was meeting a particular need, perhaps enabling a child to manage an unnamed anxiety. For children whose ordinary lives are being disrupted and derailed such small continuities as a continuing familiar story can matter. If a child has a book, rather than a toy or comforter, as a transitional object (Winnicott, 1971) this should not be overlooked. It has already been suggested that pleasurable books can be a way to build relatedness between children and new people in their lives, and as such have much potential.

It can be argued that empathy and emotional awareness are the two critical foundation stones of parenting capacity on which all else is built, and the best basic care or guidance which is constructed from empathic understanding delivered in a climate of emotional warmth. An argument that writers on literature and children's literature consistently make is that reading can develop the capacity for empathy in the reader. Reading enables individuals to imaginatively enter the experiences of others through stories and develop

empathy. Books can also draw out other kinds of feelings such as hostility and anger, as illustrated by the two parents who became angry about the Asian parents in the illustrations by Shirley Hughes.

Accounts of childhood abuse, written by adults, chart the psychological journeys that the writer has made. One example is *The Kid* (Lewis, 2003). Lewis's fears of repeating the past led him to write, just after his son was born, about his experiences of violence and abuse in childhood and the impact on his adult life. Such books are painful reading, and Lewis' wife is reported to have found reading his story very difficult (*Observer* 15th June 2003). However children's books often provide a gentler experience and a chance to identify vicariously with the characters and to experience emotion and empathy for others. Fiction is particularly good at doing this by getting under the skin through story telling. A social worker wrote about the fourth Harry Potter book (Rowling, 2000):

I found it emotionally intense and demanding. At the scene which describes Mrs Weasley hugging Harry near the end and Harry experiencing it - 'for the first time like a mother' - I had to put the book down and have a good cry.

(Personal communication, 2002)

Thus, as the emotions are engaged, the capacity for identification with other humans, empathy, is created in the reader. Parents in the study spoke of the pleasure that they have had in reading children's books and this suggests the possibilities for utilising books with parents in groups, in relation to their own feelings, capacity for empathy, and childhood histories. Care about book choice, and group process training, would be needed for any practitioner working this way, but books can be powerful processors of emotions. A practitioner wrote of Enid Blyton:

I do remember huge feelings of inadequacy that would creep over me that would wash over me when I read about these adult-like children. Similarly I remember the secret sympathy I had for those children who could not keep their clothes clean, ate all the sweets without sharing ... I knew deep down I was one of these children and I would never be good enough.

(Personal communication, 2002)

This correspondent developed sympathy and then empathy, yet also commented that Enid Blyton might be responsible for the feelings of inadequacy in many children of her generation.

All books, not just those designed for therapeutic purposes, can play a useful part in child development, helping children to handle threats and new experiences. For older children, books which help them to feel less alone and to make sense of what is happening to them, or to compensate for a loss, are a means to make them feel safer. Most books are useful and provide opportunities for relevant communication, although sometimes with unintended outcomes. For example a correspondent wrote in response to an article about the research (Matthews, 2002):

I was privately fostered until I was 5 when my mother took me back and did everything in her power to obliterate my memory of my foster family. She sent me to boarding school and having discovered I liked The Broons, a cartoon strip, she sent it to me every week. What she didn't know was that Ma Broon reminded me of my foster mother. She was buxom and cuddly; she was the placid centre of her large family of four young children, the bairn and her husband.

(Personal communication, 2002)

At a subliminal, or unconscious, level, many authors deal with dangerous situations or difficult feelings through a fantasy setting, and inner psychological order is usefully restored. This brings us to the conscious use of books in practice with children and their families. This next section includes a discussion of: the usefulness of the technique of discussing illustrations from children's books based on the Part C interviews; the implications for direct work with children; work with parents; the usefulness of the ordinary activity of reading with children for practice.

The technique of looking at illustrations with parents

The data from the parents' interviews considered in Chapter 9 showed how illustrated children's books could be utilised purposefully when discussing parenting capacity. The Shirley Hughes illustrations showing everyday activities, when discussed with parents, produced detailed comment on basic care and other dimensions of the parenting task. Some of those who said little previously commented in more detail on their own parenting practices. There were differing views, and this method of interviewing resulted in less self-conscious and more deeply felt reactions, typified by the parent who was horrified by a child seen sitting on damp grass, and the parents who warmed to the pictures of siblings sharing bathtime. The picture of the mother in the kitchen drew a range of views, both about how it felt to be caring for small children on your own and about safety.

As a tool for discussing standards of basic care during an assessment or enhancing parenting skills through groupwork in a family centre, this technique could be helpful, especially with a facilitator skilled in discussing reasonable differences and knowledgeable about children's needs. Where parents looked at the pictures in pairs or threes in the study there was an interesting range of views, which could have been guided into further discussion so that parents supported each other to decide what good practice was. It would also be possible to use this technique with parents and children together. This part of the interviews with parents

showed how children's books can provide a focus for a discussion of parenting capacity and be linked to the dimensions of the Assessment Framework.

Direct work with children

As identified in Chapter 3, direct work with children, including the use of story, has always been part of social work practice (Aldgate and Seden, 2006; Aldgate and Simmonds, 1988; Crompton, 1990). It helps children to make sense of events and relationships that affect them so that their emotional and social development continues as well as possible. Sometimes specialised therapeutic intervention is needed:

It's up to me to provide the means by which we will open doors and windows to their inner worlds. I need to provide methods for children to express their feelings, to get what they are keeping guarded inside out into the open, so that together we can deal with the material.

(Oaklander, 1978: 193):

There is a particular place for specialised therapeutic work with children who have had the most damaging experiences (Aldgate and Simmonds, 1992; Aldgate and Seden, 2006) and this is best undertaken by a child psychiatrist, clinical psychologist or counsellor. Sometimes a therapeutic community is the best option, either short or longer term.

However, utilising books with children is not just for therapists and therapy. Family support and safeguarding is also about helping children to handle their feelings about transition and change as it happens, preventing the build up of damaging unexpressed feelings. Understanding the impact of life events on children, and helping them to handle them, is part of the social work role when supporting families and safeguarding and promoting children's welfare. Practitioners who work in fostering or adoption often undertake direct work using books specially written to help them to talk with children

(Foxon, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005). Such practice is replicable in assessments and other practice situations.

Part of every practitioner's thinking could be to check that a child has available the enriching activity of reading with an adult, with someone special, maybe an older sibling, or perhaps through special input at school, especially if the child shows interest. There is also a role for independent visitors to children in accommodation, or for others, to create reading groups and links to local libraries. Everyone can help children to find books they enjoy, and build awareness of the growth of a children's literature which is more diverse and more engaged with contemporary issues, and help children to make use of it.

Books written about parents by children, which give their perspective on what is helpful, and less helpful, parenting and guidance, would be probably useful when working with children, just as the views of children who have been in care have proved illuminating for practitioners. More books are being written that reflect modern life. *Goggle Eyes* (Fine, 2000) gives a teenager's view on her mother's new partner. There are often issues, which Anne Fine captures, about guidance and boundaries for re-constituted families (Kroll, 1994), especially about who has authority in relation to step-children.

There are many books that any children's practitioner could use to talk with parents and children. For example, some older children might find Jacqueline Wilson's books helpful. Utilising the kinds of books that many children are reading anyway makes this approach less stigmatising, and means that the discussion might be indirect and safer, paving the way perhaps for children to trust the practitioner with more direct communication. Just sharing a book and having fun with a child might make the relationship between the child, and that practitioner more useful to the child and family. It may help to build the kind of valued relationship with practitioners identified by children and families in research studies (Department of Health, 2000).

Working with parents

The parents' views, about the extent to which they were like their own parents, illustrated how past childhood experiences can have an impact on present parenting. Individuals bring to their parenting a range of personal histories. These in turn may shape the parenting they offer to their children. For example, when setting guidance and boundaries for their children, parents ranged from replicating their own positive experiences to providing their children with a different kind of childhood.

While it would be inappropriate to overstate the role of reading with children on the parents' inner worlds and attempts to move on from the past, it seems reasonable to suggest from some of what the parents said that children's literature can be therapeutic for some individuals who may be struggling with their own past experiences and the impact of those on their own parenting capacity. Some of the parents' responses to the research questions show that process. For parents who have no role models, and come from maltreating family backgrounds, books provide another perspective, another world, and new ways of doing things to consider, especially if the kinds of books they read widen experience and provide figures with whom they can identify. It is a subtle, but useful, route to positive role models and the experience of other childhoods and new ideas.

In books for younger children parents are visible, with an emphasis on caring activities. However, in books for older children the parents are usually absent and there is little with which parents can identify. Where such books do exist they can be helpful. For example, a father was given a book called *Danny the Champion of the World* (Dahl, 2001) and found it a source of helpful ideas. In the book, the father is always there for Danny and lets him mature and grow through experience. The book enabled the father to think positively about himself and his role and internalise some new qualities.

Further, the reasons parents in sample 2 gave for attending family support projects were diverse. Sometimes it was to combat social isolation, sometimes for personal support, sometimes to enrich the child's experiences, sometimes to find support for parenting. Many of the sample 1 parents attended play or toddler groups and met with other parents in their own homes. Whatever reasons parents had for seeking to mix with other parents and their children, any activity based around the use of children's books would, following the finding of this study, be a useful way to intervene early, to support children and parents in their social relationships and their parenting.

Parent and child reading and child welfare practice: an 'ordinary' intervention for practitioners, children and parents

The responses of parents in the study, therefore, illustrate the potential for using books in mainstream practice, as part of assessments and interventions for family support or safeguarding. The actions of the parents in the study show that it is not just practitioners who can work with children through reading with them. Ordinary parents in this research help their children to handle their emotions and the world through books all the time. Practitioners can encourage and support parents to build their relationships with their children in this way, especially when things have gone wrong.

For example contact visits can be difficult when parents have not seen their children for a while and feelings can run high. Often parents, once separated from daily contact with their children, are insecure about how to approach their child. In this situation the use of books the child enjoys can be particularly useful, especially if the parent understands that reading with the child will rebuild relatedness, can be fun, and might open up the channels of ordinary conversation again and bring about a renewed sense of connectedness and stability. Reading a book at contact visits has the potential to restore much of what is ordinary and positive in the interaction between child and parent.

All the parents engaged with the study, showing willingness to be recruited and to answer questions about parenting and children's literature. It became apparent as the interviews progressed that the discussions about reading and parenting capacity were enjoyable, and that everyone could actively participate in some way either individually, in a pair, or in a group. The parents' responses to this research suggests there is value in such an approach to practice, which could be used to build relatedness and create supportive dialogue, exchange of ideas and partnership between adults.

As this is written (August 2006) High Street book sellers seem quite conservative in what they stock. The lists of most borrowed from libraries (Public Lending Right 1999-2006) over the period of the research have changed slowly (Appendix 3), with the same authors recurring and old standbys like Enid Blyton holding their own. Amazon, the Internet book seller, with its wider stocks and market, proved the best source of books when searching for titles on topics that parents might want to talk to children about (for example, being adopted; having a disabled brother or sister). Specific topic books were usually only familiar to one or two parents in the study.

Proactive strategies from libraries and practitioners can make a wider range of children's books available and known. In communities, family support projects and schools can have significant impact with book groups and book clubs. The parents using family support projects in this research were often accessing a wider range of books because of the family support project resources. Provision, however, despite government ministers being seen handing out bags of books, is patchy. For example budgets for books in family support projects may be small or non-existent. In this study, sample 1 had much better access to public libraries (three within five square miles) than any of the parents in sample 2, and the children reaped the benefit.

In summary, looking at children's books is something everyone, children, parents and practitioners can do (provided means for visually impaired parents to participate are found). It does not require advanced literacy to talk about shared meanings in pictures (see Chapter 9). Given the universality of reading activity with parents and children in the sample, and the identified relationship to parenting capacity, it would seem reasonable to argue that it should be explicitly identified within the Assessment Framework. It can also be argued that in a very literate society the enhancement of literacy skills in everyone is important in terms of social inclusion and the opportunity to exercise citizenship effectively.

The case for an additional dimension of parent-child reading, within the Assessment Framework which can inform practice in contemporary policy contexts.

Living in a literate society

The context for modern practice in the four countries of the UK is a world where literacy is increasingly significant. This final section therefore briefly considers the significance of living in a literate society and the importance of family literacy, as these two factors underpin and contextualise the arguments about the significance of reading with children for parenting capacity. What has emerged from the research is the importance of parents and children reading together. This has implications for ensuring the literacy of both, so that together they can enjoy this activity to the full.

However, because the focus of this thesis has been on social work, and literacy within that context, the full range of available literature in the field of literacy has deliberately not been explored here, as a discussion of literacies is several fields of study in itself. However, the findings about reading between parents and children have necessarily brought up the issue of literacy and the findings do inevitably highlight the importance of literacy. Therefore this next

section situates the findings of the study in the context of living in the literate society which exists for families today.

The term 'basic literacy' is used for the ability to read and write. This is to distinguish this functional and critical, in modern societies, ability from a range of other aspects of literacy which feature in twenty-first century life. Children can also communicate through oral experience, non verbal language and acting (Marsh and Hallett, 2001). Also, new technologies are important as ways of communicating, liberating and helping people, including children, to achieve new experiences and access to a much wider range of information.

Literacy is understood as extending to all the skills needed to survive in contemporary society which include access to information media, multicultural and visual literacies (Crowther et al., 2000). There has also been an interest in emotional literacy, the capacity to perceive, use, understand and manage emotion, relate to others and interact successfully in social environments (Goleman, 1995; Mayer and Slovey, 1997). Further, once people are basically literate, they have the power to become historically, culturally, and scientifically literate in a range of subject areas (Collins and Blot, 2003). Words carry messages, values and constructs of meaning (Tannen, 2006). Not to be literate, in this wider sense, is to miss out on the power of participation as a citizen.

Literacies and children's development

In this study, the parents' literacy on the topic of good enough parenting, and the value of the parents' reading practices with their children, are shown to include a range of functional, emotional and psychological literacies in relation to parenting. There are many families and literacies in society (Taylor, 1997) so that while there can be a relationship between a lack of literacy and poverty, this correlation cannot be generally assumed.

Many poorer families, as this study also shows, have their own funds of knowledge and approaches to literature and parenting and their choice of reading material.

However, access to a full range of social literacies, including information technologies, remains dependent on reading and writing skills, so that basic literacy in families remains an important building block for developing other literacies (Makin and Diaz, 2003). Denny and Strickland (1986) identified some of the key points about parents and children reading together. It is an activity which amongst other things:

Provides children with the opportunity to develop language and literacy skills and values in ways that are meaningful to them.

(Denny and Strickland, 1986: 14)

Reading with children continues to be promoted as something that can affect a child's happiness, progress and well-being. For example, Yabsley, writing in *The Independent*, drawing from a study by Melhuish at Birkbeck college suggests:

... the happiness level and behaviour of children are directly affected by the amount of time parents spend singing, reading and playing with them. The more time children spend on these activities, either with an adult or on their own, the more intelligent, cooperative and happier they are.

And, drawing from Claire Halsey:

Bedtime stories also set the groundwork for creating strong listening and memory skills, plus the all important interest in the written word.

Government, media and academics combine to set a high value on parental reading with children as the gateway to other literacies. The links to child development and parenting capacity, which the study confirms, make it an important component of child and family welfare practice. Thus, taking this contextual situation, together with the parents' enthusiasm for reading with their children demonstrated in this study, the next section responds further to research questions five and six by arguing for an additional dimension to the Assessment Framework.

A new dimension

Achieving the outcomes outlined in *Every Child Matters* will be the responsibility of local practitioners working together with children and their families. Literacy, reading and books therefore cannot just be the province of schools and libraries. It is a tool that other practitioners can harness in working with families to provide less stigmatising and more pleasurable forms of intervention. Positive multi-disciplinary work will be critical to the success of the new organisations for children's services. Social workers, librarians, educationalists, nursery officers and others are well placed to collaborate in relation to using children's literature to foster child development and parental capacity.

This introduces another way of knowing which helps parents reflect on their parenting capacity and draw closer to their children. The potential is there to enhance assessments, discussions and groupwork as a way of respectful encounter with therapeutic effect. Social workers, and others, can also see people in the round, think out of the box, and find solutions together with children and their parents, building health and capacity, in the contexts of their communities, using less stigmatising ways of engaging.

The research has shown how relationship and reading are part of the negotiation of the world between parent and child, and how a diverse group of parents are willing to actively engage in an exploration of this topic. TV, video and multi media experiences have not

replaced books with the parents in the study and their children. Sometimes films, or other media productions, based on books prompt a return to the original version. It is therefore suggested that when social workers use children's books as part of their interaction with children and their parents they are both working in partnership, and engaging in relationship based work. They are also affirming solution focused and strengths models, the use of self-determination and autonomy, and the place of ordinary life-affirming activities in bringing about change and growth.

It was clear from talking to the parents that they have the capacity to see children in holistic ways and would therefore be surprised to find practitioners unable to do the same. For practitioners, concerned to see children holistically, this encompasses a concern to consider all aspects of a child's growth to maturity as well as the context of carers and the wider environment in which that occurs. The Assessment Framework remains a conceptual tool for organising their thinking but could explicitly mention the importance, to child development and parenting capacity, of parental reading with children.

The creation of new organisational arrangements for children's services in England, Wales and Scotland may provide an opportunity for new kinds of creative inter-professional work with children and their families which are indeed less stigmatising and lead to social inclusion (Burford, 2005). Following the refocusing initiative (Department of Health, 1995) more creative and relationship oriented approach to child and family work was intended by the originators of the Assessment Framework, which suggested that practitioners build on strengths and enhance capacity even where there are child protection concerns (Turnell and Edwards, 1999). This is also a central plank of proposals for a twenty-first century service in Scotland which argues for more underpinning of social work through relationship (Scottish Executive, 2006).

In response to such policy agendas and the findings of this study, it is suggested that the enrichment of children's and parents' lives through children's literature needs to be on every practitioner's agenda. This is because practice that bears in mind the use of books in homes also keys in to parenting capacity and other critical agendas, especially for the most vulnerable children. Critical to achieving the outcomes of the *Every Child Matters* agenda will be the capacity of practitioners for relationship based work which is based on the least stigmatising and most ordinary interventions, the resourcing of family support policies, and multi-disciplinary understandings.

Family reading has a clear place in supporting families to become stronger and more part of their communities. Among the parents interviewed for this study, it was those who had experienced the bleakest childhoods and also experienced poor environments who were struggling to bring to parenting both inner capacity and social capital. They were however engaged with what the family support projects offered them, and importantly were reading with their children. They aspired to improve their children's experiences and wanted to take reading with their children further. Teachers, social workers and other child welfare practitioners could cooperate in promoting literacy.

The value of literacy and the pleasure of reading between adult and child is not just the role of education, but is the concern of all. It is an activity which builds parenting capacity as defined by the Assessment Framework, develops parents' and children's literacies together, and is a way for parents and practitioners to meet some of children's emotional, psychological, spiritual and moral developmental needs. Books should not be seen just as a therapeutic tool for the repair of damage, or to explain loss and transition, although they can be very useful indeed for therapeutic work. They should also be seen as a key part of any intervention that aims to ensure that every child is given the best opportunities for the development of their potential.

Conclusion and recommendations

Parents, reading and the Assessment Framework

The research found that reading to and with children was embedded in the parents' lives and an integral part of their ordinary parenting capacity. From this it might be argued, that any parent who never reads or looks at picture books with a child is unusual, and that any child who never reads with a parent is disadvantaged. If this argument is accepted it follows that children's literature, and the beneficial effects for the parent-child relationship, is important for social work practice and the findings of this research have some implications for social policy. Parent-child reading can be significant to assessments, using the Assessment Framework, and could be specifically included as part of the parenting capacity dimensions.

The importance of parent-child reading to parenting capacity

Parents' capacity to parent well, in all the Assessment Framework dimensions, can be enhanced by their reading with their children. It is an activity that can reduce stress, and help parents and children to have fun and to talk together. It is a critical part of the relationship between parent and child and can enhance the quality of the child's attachment to the parent and parent-child interactions. Books may also be part of a child's broader attachment pattern. If parents are not reading with their children they are missing opportunities to enhance much more than basic literacy, as reading with a child develops a much more comprehensive set of mutually useful emotional and psychological capacities, such as empathy, emotional responsiveness and social awareness. Visual stimuli, such as illustrations from books, are arguably as important as text for enhancing communication.

Practice with vulnerable children and their families

Vulnerable children require the same reading experiences with their parents and carers as other children, if they are to develop their potential, especially in the area of basic and other literacies. Social workers, teachers and other relevant practitioners can collaborate to enhance children and parents' opportunities to develop this aspect of their relationship. Parents' own capacities, within the terms articulated in the Assessment Framework, can also be enhanced by the use of children's literature in discussion and support groups. There are many ways in which any child and family practitioner can use books as a part of their everyday work, and plenty of scope for creative work in parent support projects.

Reading books with children cannot be seen as a specialist activity. Books as a medium of communication and relationship building are useful to all parents and practitioners, and reading with children a commonplace activity. Reading children's books, when enjoyed, is a comfortable way of communicating, which can produce new insights into a child and family situation. The usefulness of books, both to offer explanations, and as stabilising familiar objects, should be considered when children are experiencing transitions and change. Parents and children can be helped to use books together to rebuild relationships after separation or at contact.

Some policy implications

Children's books can be levellers in society and also transmit cultural values and beliefs. However, without libraries and other means of accessing a range of books, parents may not be aware of new and useful developments in children's literature. Thus policies which increase the availability of children's books to families, through schools, libraries and book groups in family support projects and schools are important.

The stimulation that comes from reading may be particularly important for those families who live in hazardous environments. Building literacies is part of building healthy

communities. Partnership work between families and practitioners within communities to promote the literacies needed for citizenship is a significant aspect of support strategies aimed at fostering the social inclusion of children and their families.

Perhaps for some social workers these possibilities might seem counter-intuitive. Reading with children is fun, and an activity that may seem to fly in the face of instrumental approaches, deficit-thinking and top down approaches. However such an approach fits well alongside social inclusion, family strengths, community based, and solution focused approaches to the enhancement of parental capacity. A consideration of an activity that develops a child's literacy is arguably intrinsic to any approach that considers the whole child, the family and their social and cultural contexts. It is also relevant to protecting children's welfare, as:

Protection is best achieved by building on the existing strengths of the child's living situation, rather than expecting miracles from isolated and spasmodic interventions.

(Department of Health, 1995: 52).

Parent-child reading: an additional dimension of parenting capacity

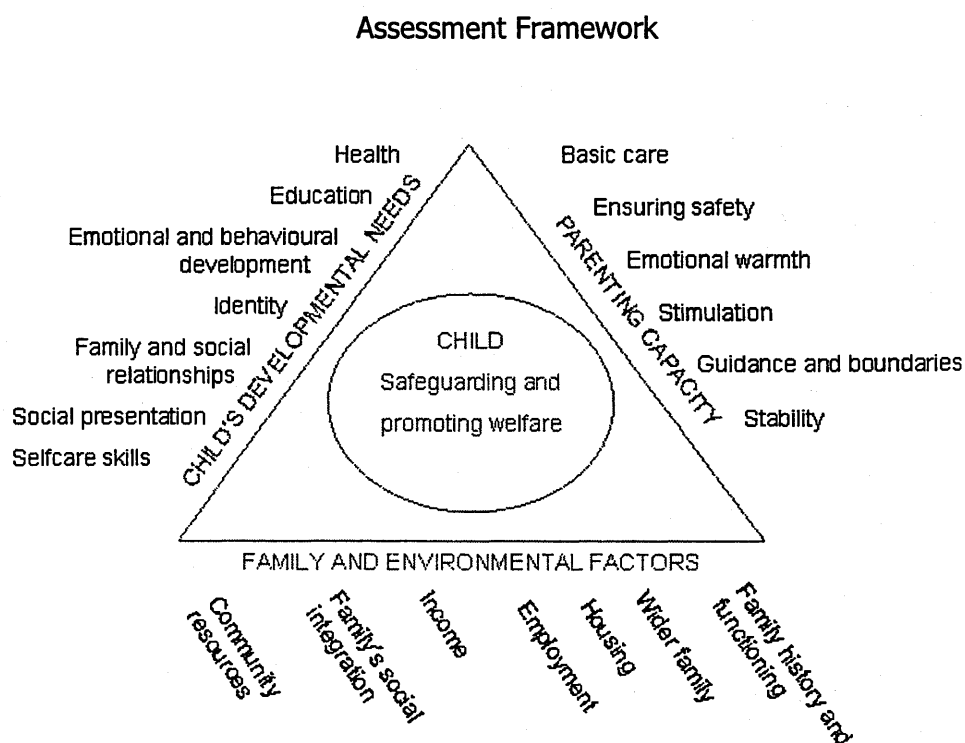
The *Every Child Matters* agenda in England and the Scottish Executive's *Getting it right for every child*, emphasise putting the child at the centre of practitioner thinking and acting, and seeing children's lives in the round. It is therefore relevant at this point to restate that books, and child-parent interaction while reading, can contribute to every aspect of a child's development, including moral and spiritual development, and also all the dimensions of parenting capacity articulated in the Assessment Framework. Pullman (2004) has argued that fuelling a child's emotional, imaginative and spiritual development through literature and the arts is 'as important as fresh air' as without literature, art and

music children 'perish from the inside'. Such fuelling is a basic function of the task of parenting and therefore part of any assessment of parenting capacity.

Camila Batmanghelidh founder of Kids Club, a not for profit organisation which supports homeless children and young people, speaking on March 1st 2006 in Nottingham, argued that social care could be a 'creative opportunity' to build relationships which 'enhance children's self-esteem, well-being, development and sense of being appreciated for who they are'. Emotional literacy is an advantage throughout life in a society that values and depends on literacies. Therefore the enhancement of parents', practitioners' and children's emotional capacities and empathic awareness is important. This can happen through the use of a commonplace and ordinary activity, reading children's books together, which therefore must be considered a critical part of creative work with vulnerable children and their families within the *Every Child Matters* paradigm.

Appendix 1

The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families: diagram and summary of dimensions.



DIMENSIONS OF CHILD'S DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS

Health

Includes growth and development as well as physical and mental wellbeing. The impact of genetic factors and of any impairment should be considered. Involves receiving appropriate health care when ill, an adequate and nutritious diet, exercise, immunisations where appropriate and developmental checks, dental and optical care and, for older children, appropriate advice and information on issues that have an impact on health, including sex education and substance misuse.

Education

Covers all areas of a child's cognitive development which begins from birth. Includes opportunities: for play and interaction with other children; to have access to books; to acquire a range of skills and interests; to experience success and achievement. Involves an adult interested in educational activities, progress and achievements, who takes account of the child's starting point and any special educational needs.

Emotional and Behavioural Development

Concerns the appropriateness of response demonstrated in feelings and actions by a child, initially to parents and caregivers and, as the child grows older, to others beyond the family. Includes nature and quality of early attachments, characteristics of temperament, adaptation to change, response to stress and degree of appropriate self control.

Identity

Concerns the child's growing sense of self as a separate and valued person. Includes the child's view of self and abilities, self image and self esteem, and having a positive sense of individuality. Race, religion, age, gender, sexuality and disability may all contribute to this. Feelings of belonging and acceptance by family, peer group and wider society, including other cultural groups.

Family and Social Relationships

Development of empathy and the capacity to place self in someone else's shoes. Includes a stable and affectionate relationship with parents or caregivers, good relationships with siblings, increasing importance of age appropriate friendships with peers and other significant persons in the child's life and response of family to these relationships.

Social Presentation

Concerns child's growing understanding of the way in which appearance, behaviour, and any impairment are perceived by the outside world and the impression being created. Includes appropriateness of dress for age, gender, culture and religion; cleanliness and personal hygiene; and availability of advice from parents or caregivers about presentation in different settings.

Self Care Skills

Concerns the acquisition by a child of practical, emotional and communication competencies required for increasing independence. Includes early practical skills of dressing and feeding, opportunities to gain confidence and practical skills to undertake activities away from the family and independent living skills as older children. Includes encouragement to acquire social problem solving approaches, Special attention should be given to the impact of a child's impairment and other vulnerabilities, and on social circumstances affecting these in the development of self care skills.

DIMENSIONS OF PARENTING CAPACITY**Basic Care**

Providing for the child's physical needs, and appropriate medical and dental care. Includes provision of food, drink, warmth, shelter, clean and appropriate clothing and adequate personal hygiene.

Ensuring Safety

Ensuring the child is adequately protected from harm or danger. Includes protection from significant harm or danger, and from contact with unsafe adults/other children and from self-harm. Recognition of hazards and danger both in the home and elsewhere.

Emotional Warmth

Ensuring the child's emotional needs are met giving the child a sense of being specially valued and a positive sense of own racial and cultural identity. Includes ensuring the child's requirements for secure, stable and affectionate relationships with significant adults, with appropriate sensitivity and responsiveness to the child's needs. Appropriate physical contact, comfort and cuddling sufficient to demonstrate warm regard, praise and encouragement.

Stimulation

Promoting child's learning and intellectual development through encouragement and cognitive stimulation and promoting social opportunities. Includes facilitating the child's cognitive development and potential through interaction, communication, talking and responding to the child's language and questions, encouraging and joining the child's play,

and promoting educational opportunities. Enabling the child to experience success and ensuring school attendance or equivalent opportunity. Facilitating child to meet challenges of life.

Guidance and Boundaries

Enabling the child to regulate their own emotions and behaviour and control of emotions and interactions with others, and guidance which involves setting boundaries, so that the child is able to develop an internal model of moral values and conscience, and social behaviour appropriate for the society within which they will grow up. The aim is to enable the child to grow into an autonomous adult, holding their own values and able to demonstrate appropriate behaviour with others rather than having to be dependent on rules outside themselves. This includes not over protecting children from exploratory and learning experiences. Includes social problem solving, anger management, consideration for others, and effective discipline and shaping of behaviour.

Stability

Providing a sufficiently stable family environment to enable a child to develop and maintain a secure attachment to the primary caregiver(s) in order to ensure optimal development. Includes: ensuring secure attachments are not disrupted, providing consistency of emotional warmth over time and responding in a similar manner to the same behaviour. Parental responses change and develop according to child's developmental progress. In addition, ensuring children keep in contact with important family members and significant others. (Last 2 sentences added by: Jones, 2001).

FAMILY AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

Family History and Functioning

Family history includes both generic and psycho-social factors. Family functioning is influenced by who is living in the household and how they are related to the child; significant changes in family/household composition; history of childhood experiences or parents; chronology of significant life events and their meaning to family members; nature of family functioning, including sibling relationships and its impact on the child; parental strengths and difficulties, including those of an absent parent; the relationship between separated parents.

Wider Family

Who are considered to be members of the wider family by the child and the parents? This includes related and non-related persons and absent wider family. What is their role and importance to the child and parents and in precisely what way?

Housing

Does the accommodation have basic amenities and facilities appropriate to the age and development of the child and other resident members? Is the housing accessible and suitable to the needs of disabled family members? Includes the interior and exterior of the accommodation and immediate surroundings. Basic amenities include water, heating, sanitation, cooking facilities, sleeping arrangements and cleanliness, hygiene and safety and their impact on the child's upbringing.

Employment

Who is working in the household, their pattern of work and any changes? What impact does this have on the child? How is work or absence of work viewed by family members? How does it affect their relationship with the child? Includes children's experience of work and its impact on them.

Income

Income available over sustained period of time. Is the family in receipt of all its benefit entitlements? Sufficiency of income to met the family's needs. The way resources available to the family are used. Are there financial difficulties which affect the child?

Family's Social Integration

Exploration of the wider context of the local neighbourhood and community and its impact on the child and parents. Includes the degree of the family's integration or isolation, their peer groups, friendship and social networks and the importance attached to them.

Community Resources

Describes all facilities and services in a neighbourhood, including universal services or primary health care, day care and schools, places of worship, transport, shops and leisure activities. Includes availability, accessibility and standard of resources and impact on the family, including disabled members.

From: Department of Health et al (2000) Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families, pp 19, 21 and 23 respectively.

Appendix 2

Research instrument: Parts A, B, C and D including the illustrations from the books by Shirley Hughes.

PART A: Assessment Framework Dimensions Questionnaire (baseline survey)

These are some qualities that professionals consider when they are working in areas around parenting. How important are they to you?

- Rate 1-3 where
- 1. Not at all Important
 - 2. Fairly Important
 - 3. Very Important

Add examples of your own and rate them if you wish to.

1. Basic Care

Providing for physical needs (food, drink, warmth, shelter, clothes)	1	2	3
Keeping the child clean	1	2	3
Providing medical care	1	2	3
Providing dental care	1	2	3
Own examples			

2. Safety

Protection from harm (household accidents)	1	2	3
Protection from harm (outside the home)	1	2	3
Protection from contact with unsafe adults	1	2	3
Own examples			

3. Emotional Warmth

Making a child feel valued	1	2	3
Giving a sense of cultural identity	1	2	3
Affection	1	2	3
Sensitivity	1	2	3
Cuddles	1	2	3
Praise	1	2	3
Encouragement	1	2	3
Respect	1	2	3
Own Examples			

4. Stimulation

Promoting learning	1	2	3
Communicating	1	2	3

Talking	1	2	3
Playing	1	2	3
Answering questions	1	2	3
Sending to school	1	2	3
Sending to other activities	1	2	3
Own examples			

5. Guidance and Boundaries

Modelling behaviour (being an example)	1	2	3
Controlling own emotions	1	2	3
Showing ways of relating to others	1	2	3
Setting boundaries on child's behaviour	1	2	3
Making rules	1	2	3
Teaching values	1	2	3
Protecting from poor experiences	1	2	3
Encouraging a range of experiences	1	2	3
Discipline	1	2	3
Managing anger	1	2	3
Considering others	1	2	3
Shaping behaviour	1	2	3
Own examples			

6. Stability

Safe family environment	1	2	3
Being there	1	2	3
Consistency	1	2	3
Emotional warmth	1	2	3
Keeping contact with wider family	1	2	3
Keeping contact with absent parent	1	2	3
Keeping contact absent siblings	1	2	3
Flexibility	1	2	3
Adapting to change	1	2	3
Own examples			

Things a parent should try never to do:

PART B: Parenting and Literature Questionnaire

1. Can you think about someone who you think is a good parent - not your own parent?
2. Can you describe their qualities?
3. What do you particularly admire about them?
4. Most people find it difficult not to be like their own parent, some people feel they would do things differently. What do you think you do the same/different from your own parents?
5. What are your concerns about being a parent in the here and now?
6. Where would you go for help/advice if you needed help with bringing up your children?
7. Think about children's books you may have read with a parent in it recently
8. What do you like/dislike about that/those parent(s)?
9. What other books do you like to read with your children?
10. What do you think you and your children get out of reading together?
11. Where do you get books?
12. Are there any children's books, which you and your child(ren) have read together that help you to talk about/respond to particular experiences or difficulties? (e.g. starting school; parents separating).

PART C: Case Study Illustrations from Shirley Hughes

Browse through some images - think about the parents/parent figures.

1. What do you like/dislike in these images?
2. What is like you/not like you?

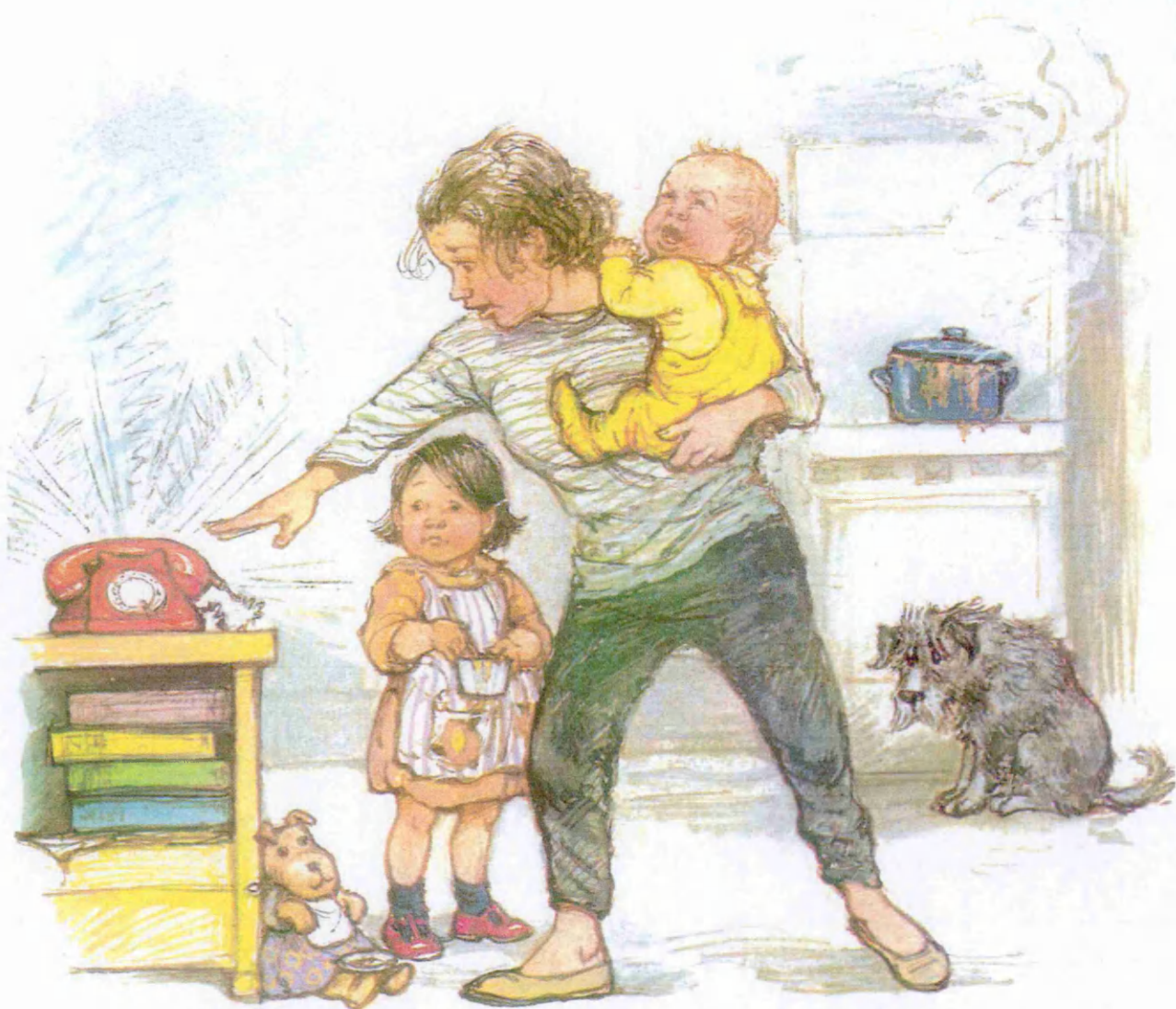
The pictures are attached on the following pages.



Three ladies chatting on a bench,



Four babies in buggies,



Telephone ringing, baby bawling,
Midnight cats
cat-a-wauling.





Vacuum cleaner
Vroom-vroom-
vrooming;

And if I dance
and sing a tune,
Baby joins in
with a saucepan
and spoon.



PART D: Interviewee Data Questionnaire

1. Name
2. Contact Address and Telephone
3. Age
4. Partner's Age
5. Children Gender and Ages
6. Occupation
8. Source of Income
9. Education

Little formal; GCSE; A Levels; Degree; Higher Degree.

10. Ethnic background (Own description)

Appendix 3

Public Lending Right: Most Borrowed Children's Authors

July 1997 – June 1998

1	R. L. Stine	11	Shirley Hughes
2	Janet & Allan Ahlberg	12	Martin Waddell
3	Ann M. Martin	13	Nick Butterworth
4	Roald Dahl	14	Lucy Daniels
5	Enid Blyton	15	Tony Bradman
6	Dick King-Smith	16	Jacqueline Wilson
7	John Cunliffe	17	Jill Murphy
8	Goscinny	18	Kate William
9	Mick Inkpen	19	David McKee
10	Eric Hill	20	Colin & Jacqui Hawkins

July 2004 – June 2005

1	Jacqueline Wilson	11	Dick King-Smith
2	Mick Inkpen	12	R. L. Stine
3	Janet & Allan Ahlberg	13	Terry Deary
4	Roald Dahl	14	Martin Waddell
5	Lucy Daniels	15	Ian Whybrow
6	Enid Blyton	16	Francesca Simon
7	Nick Butterworth	17	Colin & Jacqui Hawkins
8	Eric Hill	18	Debi Gliori
9	Lucy Cousins	19	Shirley Hughes
10	Rose Impey	20	David McKee

Appendix 4

Data analysis of research instrument Part D: demographic data

All parents received Part D forms but not all were returned (e.g. 23, 24). Thus some information has been entered from transcripts of audiotapes (ref (T) in table) and some from information provided to the researcher (ref (R) in table). Most data is from the interviewee's completed forms.

Number (single interview unless pair/group indicated)	Age and Gender; Place of Interview	Family Composition (re partner, my term did not distinguish between married and non married)	Occupation; Source of Income	Educational Background (own description but also asked to circle highest on the list)	Ethnic Origin (own description)
1	43 f Own home	Partner (41) Son (8) Daughter (11) Daughter (13)	Adult education tutor (basic skills); Partner university lecturer; Income salaried	Degree	White
2	38 f Own home	Partner Son (8) Daughter (6)	Teacher; Partner computer management; Income salaried	GCE's; A levels; B.Ed Hon	British; White
3	43 f Own home	Partner (41) Daughter (14) Son (10) Son (6)	Doctor (GP); Partner consultant psychiatrist; Income salaried	Degree	White; British
4	57 f Own home	Partner (59) Granddaughter (8) Childminding 3 children (2, 3, 9) Grown up children x 4: daughter; adopted son; fostered son and daughter	Childminder; Partner retired; Income = partners retirement income + childminding	GCSE; Nursing qualification	White; British
5	44 f Own home	Partner (45) Son (15) Daughter (12)	Learning support assistant primary school; Partner quality manager; Income salaried	A levels	White; UK

6	22 f Own home	Partner (22) Son (3) Daughter (7m)	Teacher (not working); Partner teacher; Income salaried	A levels	White; British
7	47 f Own home	Partner (39) Son (24) Daughter (20) Daughter (2.5)	Priest; Partner manager; Income mainly from partner's business.	Degree	White; European
8	27 f Own home	Partner (28) Son (2)	Mother; Partner computer programmer; Income partner's wage	A levels	Christian; White
9	28 f Own home	Partner (29) Daughter (1)	Housewife; Partner computer programmer; Income partner's employment	GCSE; A levels; Degree; Higher Degree	White; British
10	45 f Own home	Widow Son (16) Son (14) Daughter (11)	Housewife (ex chartered accountant); Income private	Degree; Accountancy qualification	White; British; C of E
11	37 f Own home	Partner (40) Daughter (7) Son (4)	Housewife; Partner auctioneer; Income from partner	O levels	No data
12	23 f Family Support Project 1 (FSP 1)	Partner (34) Son (3) Son (21m)	Homemaker; Partner farmer; Income from partner	Standard grade (Scotland); NVQ3 in racehorse care	Relaxed, easy-going Scottish cross
13	30 f FSP 1	Partner (29) Daughter (2.5) Baby expected	Optical receptionist; Partner cabinet maker /production manager; Income mainly partners salary	GCSE	Irish/British; Roman Catholic

14	34 f FSP 1	Partner (31) Son (3)	Housewife; Partner LCV driver; Income from partner	O levels; A levels; NNEB	English; White
15	37 f FSP 2	Partner (38) Triplets: two girls and a boy(5.5) Daughter (2)	Housewife/ mother; Partner telephone engineer; Income salary + benefits	CSE; O levels; BTEC; Nursing qualification (ENG and SRN)	English
16	33 m FSP 2	Separated (R) Son (3.5)	Unemployed; Income benefits	GCSE	White (R)
17	20 f FSP 2	No partner Son (2) Son (10m)	Full time mother; Income benefits	GCSE	British
18 (T)	20's f FSP 2	Single parent 2 children	Mother; Income benefits	No data	White (R); British (R)
19	52 f FSP 2	Partner (49) Daughter (35) Daughter (34) Daughter (33) Son (24) [Attends family centre with grandchild]	Home; Income no data	No data	White (R); British (R)
20 (group with 21 and 22)	36 f FSP 3	Partner (37) Son (2) Son (5m)	Mother; Partner lifeguard; Income no data	GCSE	British
21 (group with 20 and 22)	18 f FSP 3	Partner (27) Daughter (15m)	Income from waged partner	GCSE	English/ Iranian
22 (group with 20 and 21)	36 f FSP 3	Partner (24) Son (28m)	Student; Partner night engineer; Income from wages	Degree	Mother Japanese; Father Sri Lankan; Children dual heritage
23 (pair with 24) (T)	Late 20's f (R) FSP 3	Partner 4 children: Oldest (s) (5) Daughter (3) 2 babies	No data	No data	White (R);

24 (pair with 23) (T)	Late 20's f FSP 3	Partner 3 children: Oldest (s) (10)	No data	No data	White (R);
25 (group with 26 and 27) (T)	30's f FSP 4	Partner 2 daughters	Family centre deputy manager; Partner no data; Income no data	NNEB	White; British
26 (group with 25 and 27)	35 f FSP 4	No Partner Son (10) Daughter (5) Daughter (2)	Student; Income support	GCSE; A levels	Black; British
27 (group with 25 and 26)	32 f FSP 4	No Partner Son (11) Son (9) Daughter (3)	Student; Income support	Higher degree	Mixed race
28 (pair with 29)	27 f FSP 4	Partner (30) Son (7) Son (6) Daughter (4) Daughter (3)	Housewife; Partner forklift truck driver; Income benefits	Little formal education	Pakistani
29 (pair with 28)	32 f FSP 4	Partner Son (5)	Children's services manager; Partner manager NSPCC; Income salaried	Higher education	Asian/Hindu
30 (T)	32 f FSP 5	Partner (23) Son (5) Daughter (4) Daughter (3)	At home; Income benefits	Left school at 15 with no qualifications	White (R)
31	17 m FSP 5	Partner (26) Son (2) Daughter (15m) Son (10w)	Occupation no data; Income benefits	Left school at 15 with no qualifications to support partner with children	White
32 (pair with 33)	28 f FSP 5	Partner (33) Daughter (3) Daughter (23m)	Housewife; Partner gardener; Income support	Little formal education	White; British
33 (pair with 32)	26 f FSP 5	Partner (21) Son (5) Daughter (3)	Housewife; Partner civil servant; Income no comment	No data	White

Appendix 5

Consent form



**School of Health &
Social Welfare**

The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA
Telephone (01908)
274066

Direct line (01908)
652906
Telex 825061
Fax (01908) 654124

Dr J Walmsley
Dean
2002

Research Project

Agreement to participate

You are invited to take part in a research project about being a parent and reading books to children. The researcher will explain the purposes of the research and how the information will be used. Please feel free to ask for clarification of any question that you don't understand. Your participation in the project is entirely voluntary and any information that you provide is confidential. If you agree to take part in this research, please read this form, complete and sign one copy and give it to the researcher. The other copy is for you to keep. You may refuse to participate in the research at any time by simply saying so.

I

(print name)

agree to take part in the research project undertaken by Janet Seden from the School of Health and Social Welfare who will give me a copy of this consent form.

I have had the purposes of the project explained to me.

I may refuse to participate in the research at any time by simply saying so.

I have been assured that my confidentiality will be protected

I agree that anonymised versions of the information I have given can be used for educational purposes or publication

I understand that if I have any concerns or research related difficulties I can contact the researcher at the Open University (address above) by email j.p.seden@open.ac.uk or at 0116 2702128.

If I wish to complain about the behaviour of the researcher, I can contact Professor P. J. Aldgate (research supervisor) at the School of Health and Social Welfare.

I assign the copyright for my contribution to Janet Seden for use in research and publication

Signed:

Date:.....

Appendix 6

Data analysis of research instrument Part A

Parent Qualities Questionnaire – Summary of Quantitative Data

These are some qualities that professionals consider when they are working in areas around parenting.

How important are they to you? Rate 1-3 where

1 = Not at all Important

2 = Fairly Important

3 = Very Important

Add examples of your own and rate them if you wish to.

((x) in the table indicates no data)

Parenting quality	Sample 1											S1 Avg	Sample 2																S2 Avg	O/a Avg							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11		12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27			28	29	30	31	32	33	
1. Basic Care																																					
Providing for physical needs	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	x	x	3	3	3	x	3	3	3	3	3	3	2.9	2.9	
Keeping the child clean	3	2	3	2	3	2	2	1	2	2	3	2	3	3	1	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	x	x	3	2	2	x	2	3	2	3	2	3	2.6	2.5	
Providing medical care	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	x	3	3	3	3	3	3	x	x	3	3	3	x	3	3	3	3	3	3	2.9	2.9	
Providing dental care	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	x	x	3	3	3	x	3	3	3	3	3	3	2.9	2.9	
Own examples	4: Psychological care.											12: A child should be allowed to enjoy themselves by getting a bit of dirt and not having to worry.																									
	6: Love.																																				

	7:	Providing emotional care, providing opportunities to learn, toys, books etc.	18: 27: 29:	A good healthy diet. Children at times are deliciously dirty and then you know they had a good play day. Personal experiences.
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Parenting quality	Sample 1											S1	Sample 2																	S2	O/a					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11		12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28			29	30	31	32	33
Interview																																				
2. Safety																																				
Protection from harm (household accident)	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3.0	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	x		x	3	3	2	x	3	3	3	3	3	2.9	2.9
Protection from harm (outside the home)	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3.0	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	x		x	3	3	3	x	3	3	3	3	3	2.9	2.9
Protection from contact (unsafe adult)	3	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	3	2.8	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	x		x	3	3	3	x	3	3	3	4	3	3.0	3.0
Own examples	2: My main worry when thinking of the children growing up is the problems they are going to have to face within society, e.g. drugs, peer pressure. I hope I can protect/guide them.												14: Worry about society and unsafe situations with adults. 18: Care about burns, scalds, tools, instruments, plants in the home, paedophiles and strangers offering sweets in cars. 27: Teach children safety. 29: Talking about safety.																							
	4: How to approach pets (2). 8: Difficult to protect from household accidents as things happen even though you try.																																			
	10: Although these are all very important, I try to find a balance so that the children can learn from themselves																																			

	and their peers how to live safely, as well as advice and help from home.	
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Parenting quality		Sample 1											S1	Sample 2																			S2	O/a																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																											
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11		12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30			31	32	33																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																								
3. Emotional Warmth																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																													
Making a child feel valued		3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	x	x	3	3	3	3	x	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3

	important for a child to be happy with themselves, not to see learning as the be all and end all.	
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Parenting quality		Sample 1											S1	Sample 2																	S2	O/a					
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11		12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28			29	30	31	32	33
4. Stimulation																																					
Interview																																					
Promoting learning	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	2.7	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	x	x	3	3	4	x	3	3	3	3	2.9	2.9
Communicating	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3.0	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	x	x	3	3	2	x	3	2	3	3	3	2.9	2.9
Talking	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2.9	3	3	3	3	x	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	x	x	2	3	4	x	3	2	3	3	2.9	2.9	
Playing	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	2.8	3	3	3	3	x	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	x	x	2	3	3	x	3	2	3	3	2.8	2.8	
Answering questions	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	2.9	2	3	3	x	2	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	x	x	3	3	3	x	3	3	3	3	2.8	2.9	
Sending to school	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	2.8	3	3	3	x	2	2	3	3	2	3	3	3	x	x	3	3	3	x	3	2	3	3	2.8	2.8	
Sending to other activities	2	3	2	2	3	2	2	2	3	2	2	2.3	2	3	3	x	2	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	x	x	2	3	3	x	3	2	2	2	2.6	2.4	
Own examples	2: Playing, particularly imaginative play I find more difficult than more structured activities.												18: Treat each child differently – their needs are different and developmental stages at different levels.																								
	7: Encouraging learning - not sending but offering on last two categories.												29: Being open and honest.																								

Parenting quality	Sample 1											S1	Sample 2																	S2	O/a							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11		12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28			29	30	31	32	33		
Interview	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2.9	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	3	x	x	3	3	3	x	3	3	3	3	3	3	2.7	2.8	
5. Guidance and Boundaries																																						
Modelling behaviour	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3		3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2.7	2.8	
Controlling own emotions	3	3	3	2	2	3	1	3	3	2	2	2.4	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	2	2	2	3	x	x	2	2	3	3	x	3	3	3	2	2.6	2.5		
Showing ways of relating to others	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	3	2	2.9	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	2	2	3	3	x	x	2	3	3	3	x	3	3	3	3	2.7	2.7		
Setting boundaries on child's behaviour	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	2	3	3	2	2.7	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	x	x	3	3	3	3	3	x	3	3	2	3	2.9	2.8		
Making rules	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2.1	3	2	3	2	3	3	2	3	2	3	1	3	x	x	3	3	4	x	3	3	2	3	2.6	2.5		
Teaching values	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2.8	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	x	x	3	3	3	4	x	3	3	3	3	2.9	2.9		
Protecting from poor experiences	3	3	3	1	2	3	1	1	3	2	3	2.3	2	3	3	1	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	x	x	2	3	2	2	x	3	3	2	3	2.6	2.5		
Encouraging a range of experiences	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	2.6	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	x	x	2	3	3	3	x	3	3	3	3	2.9	2.8		
Discipline	3	3	3	2	2	3	2	2	3	3	2	2.5	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	2	3	2	3	x	x	3	3	3	3	x	3	3	3	3	2.8	2.7		
Managing anger	3	2	3	3	2	3	1	3	2	3	2	2.6	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	x	x	3	3	3	3	x	3	3	3	3	2.9	2.7		
Considering others	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	2.9	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	2	2	3	x	x	x	3	3	3	3	x	3	3	2	3	2.7	2.8		
Shaping behaviour	2	3	3	2	2	2	1	3	3	2	3	2.2	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	x	2	1	3	x	x	3	3	3	3	x	3	2	2	3	2.6	2.5		

Own examples	<p>2: The hardest area!</p> <p>7: Consistency is the ideal but can be hard to achieve. Learning to accept and recognise emotions.</p>	<p>14: Do not cry or be angry in front of a child.</p> <p>15: Vary the above according to the child's age and personality.</p> <p>18: We don't live in an ideal world, there are times when life is going to be difficult but as long as you communicate with the child and explain in words they can understand – show them books if you can to suit their ability.</p> <p>29: Give children choices and openly involve them in decisions.</p> <p>33: Count to 10 before talking to child on discipline.</p>
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Parenting quality	Sample 1											S1	Sample 2																	S2	O/a						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11		12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28			29	30	31	32	33	
6. Stability																																					
Safe family environment	3	3	3	2	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	2.7	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	x	x	3	4	x	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3.0	2.9
Being there	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2.9	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	x	x	3	3	x	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2.9	2.9
Consistency	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3.0	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	x	x	3	3	x	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	2.9	2.9	
Emotional warmth	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3.0	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	x	x	2	3	x	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	2.8	2.9	
Keeping contact with wider family	3	2	3	2	2	2	2	3	2	3	3	2.5	3	3	2	3	3	2	3	3	2	1	3	x	x	2	3	x	3	3	3	2	3	1	2.5	2.5	
Keeping contact with absent parent	3	3	3	2	2	3	2	3	x	3	3	2.7	3	2	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	1	2	x	x	2	3	x	3	3	3	3	1	x	2.5	2.6	
Keeping contact absent siblings	3	3	3	2	2	3	2	3	x	3	3	2.7	3	2	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	1	2	x	x	2	3	x	3	3	3	3	1	x	2.6	2.6	
Flexibility	3	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	2	3	3	2.5	3	2	2	3	2		3	3	2	1	3	x	x	2	x	x	3	3	3	2	3	3	2.5	2.5	
Adapting to change	3	2	2	3	2	3	3	3	2	3	2	2.5	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	2	1	3	x	x	3	3	x	3	3	3	3	3	3	2.7	2.6	
Own examples												14:	Prefers routine to flexibility and explains reasons for changes to child.																								
												18:	Support is important for changes and a routine is also important.																								
												32:	If the absent parent has done something to the child I wouldn't allow contact.																								

Table 1. Responses of all the parents to the question 'what things should a parent try never to do?'	
1.	Hit anyone; be violent; seeing aggression among adults; stick to boundaries and don't allow something one day and not the next.
2.	Undermine a child; use children in an argument with others; swear at a child; voice disapproval of friends (at a young age); fight every battle for the child; believe everything a child says; become paranoid and act on it.
3.	Leave a child alone; belittle a child's efforts; allow a child to have unsuitable experiences e.g. watching adult films which remove a child's innocence.
4.	Do not denigrate or make feel small; show child up in front of peers; stop from doing things that are safe but that you don't like or understand; exclude from the family for a long time; ignore questions.
5.	A child should always feel valued – no matter what incident/situation has taken place; a parent should never humiliate; reject a child regardless of age; cut a child off emotionally or physically.
6.	Abuse – physical, verbal, sexual.
7.	No data
8.	Behave in a way that you wouldn't want your child to follow; deliberately hurt the child although my child does get a short sharp smack on the bottom or hand for deliberate bad behaviour.
9.	Harm child; put child into a dangerous environment/situation.
10.	Forcing your own beliefs onto a child; choosing a child's friends.
11.	Take out your own tiredness on children i.e. getting cross, smacking etc.

12.	Undermine their children; lose control (know when to take a break).
13.	Ignore their children; not stopping children following needs e.g. music or art.
14.	Smacking; stress; having little time.
15.	Compare siblings; put all your own values and opinions on children; let them decide some things for themselves.
16.	Get angry; lose control; ignore; smack; abuse physically, mentally and sexually.
17.	Smacking; being over-disciplinary; leave a child out while doing something; leave a child alone.
18.	Do not be someone you are not or pretend there is an ideal world; do not be afraid to show emotion; try to explain why things are happening; always put your own childhood experiences, for good or bad, to use with your own children.
19.	Make a child grow up before ready, e.g. a 2 year old will not behave like a 4 year old; listen to children and do not label them.
20.	Have children in the kitchen while cooking.
21.	No data
22.	Stigmatise a mixed race child.
23.	No data
24.	No data
25.	Difficult to say and then succeed.
26.	I never want to smack.

27.	I try never to lie to them and if I say I will do something to do it.
28.	Force their will on their children.
29.	Just be open and honest; never tell lies; communication is the key to understanding.
30.	Try never to leave them alone; keep sharp objects away from children; keep a good eye on them.
31.	Not punish them in a way that hurts them physically.
32.	I would never do everything that was done to me as a child.
33.	Do not push your child in to something he/she doesn't want to do; do not give them too much responsibility like jobs round the house or opening doors for strangers or push them to do too much homework; there can be too much responsibility to cope with and it's the parent's job not the child's.

Table 2**Books read with children by their parents**

Parent	Books read in last few weeks	Books read to explain experiences
1	Heidi; The Dustbin Kid; Jacqueline Wilson; The Magician's House; Shirley Hughes; Helen Oxenbury; Sci-fi; Poetry.	x
2	Harry Potter; Walker Bear books; Peace at Last; Charlie and the Chocolate Factory; The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.	x
3	Winnie the Pooh; The Honey tree; James Bond; The Faraway Tree (Enid Blyton); Shirley Hughes; Comics; Factual books; Adventure stories.	x
4	Shirley Hughes; Picture books.	Books about shyness and bullying.
5	Jacqueline Wilson; Enid Blyton; Mallory Towers; Wind in The Willows; E. Nesbitt; Shirley Hughes.	Books on puberty and physical development; Seeking books on cultural identity for work.

6	Harry Potter; Mr Men; Fairy tales; Thomas the Tank Engine.	x
7	Albert Mapelbert; Where the Wild Things Are; Mrs Potts the Plumber; Picture books; Barbie books.	Potty training book; Badger's Parting Gifts (about death).
8	Picture books; Rhyming books; The Little Red Car; Thomas the Tank Engine.	Doctors and nurses book for hospital visit.
9	Picture books; Baby Days by Fiona Puggle; James and the Giant Peach; Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.	Potty training book; Going to the doctors; A new baby being born.
10	The Man by Raymond Briggs; Spot; Thomas the Tank Engine; The Sophie Books by Dick King Smith; Animal books.	Shirley Hughes Dogger (about losing things and being sad).
11	Harry Potter; Rupert the Bear; The Famous Five.	Books about: starting school; being a bridesmaid; a sibling being born.
12	Picture books; Farmer's Weekly.	Starting school; Poorly Bear.

13	Picture books; Winnie the Pooh; Short stories and rhyming books; Thomas the Tank Engine.	Didn't find a book that explained the arrival of a new baby simply enough.
14	Richard Strange; Shirley Hughes, especially Kipper; Thomas the Tank Engine; The Little Princess; Postman Pat.	Starting nursery school; Book about pet dying.
15	Picture books; Story books; Teddy and Freddy's Bear Hunt; Animal books; Little Women; Tom's Midnight Garden; Other abbreviated classics (ready for later).	Starting nursery; Going to hospital.
16	Picture books about fire engines; Thunderbirds; Bob the Builder; Noddy.	My Dad is Great; Going to hospital; Helping your child through separation and divorce.
17	Picture books; Word books; Stories.	Going to hospital.
18	Picture books.	x
19	Jungle Book; Noddy; Janet and John; Animal books.	Badger's Parting Gifts.

20	Caterpillar books; Counting books; Thomas the Tank Engine; Bob the Builder; Animal books; Books with stickers and games; Daisy the Duck; The Elf and the Shoemaker.	Hospital book; New baby book.
21	Picture books; Cloth books; Beauty and the Beast; Cinderella.	Hospital book; New baby book.
22	Fairy tales from Japan; Picture books; Stories.	Hospital book; New baby book.
23	School books; Animal books; Books about different cultures; The Hungry Caterpillar.	x
24	Lots of story and picture books.	x
25	Helen Oxenbury; Shirley Hughes; My Naughty Little Sister.	x
26	Jacqueline Wilson.	A book on 'wandering off'.
27	Enid Blyton; Mr Pinkwhistle; The Rescuers.	x

28	All different kinds of books from school; Picture books; Stories; Spot.	x
29	Mr and Mrs Large; Jill Murphy; Shirley Hughes; Animal stories.	A book about adoption.
30	Alphabet books; School books; Picture books.	Starting school.
31	Magazines; Bob the Builder; Tweenies; The Railway Children.	Explains things using pictures in books.
32	Stories.	x
33	Stories.	x
Total	33 reading to some degree. 31 actively reading.	21 using books for experiences.

Table 3**Sources of books read to children by their parents**

Source of Books	Times mentioned		
	Sample 1 n=11	Sample 2 n=22	All parents n=33
Library	9	8	17
Book Shop	5	11	16
Presents	6	7	13
Handed Down	4	5	9
Family Support Project	0	8	8
Book Club	2	4	6
School	2	4	6
Charity Shop	1	1	2

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Postscript

This postscript aims firstly to note the shifts in emphasis in policy for children and their families while this research was underway, and secondly to argue for the continued importance of children's literature and reading with children in relation to policy shifts. Many of the factors that contribute to a warm and caring childhood with strong attachments to parents and carers, including the ordinary activity of story telling and parent and child reading together endure across the generations and across cultures. This is a process which can contribute to a range of positive indicators for child well-being. Childhood is socially constructed, and for the most vulnerable, childhood is more strongly shaped by the particular policy contexts which determine how government seeks to address the socialisation of children and whether it provides strategies for family support. How the state balances the equation between supporting parental responsibility and intervening in children's lives to enhance their growing up or manage their behaviour, is particularly critical.

The thesis originated when the policy emphasis, led by research (DH 1995), had moved away from the protection paradigm and the associated targeted interventions and child rescue approach of the 1980s towards increased family support, earlier intervention, and a holistic, ecologically based paradigm which predominated from 1995. This was described as refocusing services away from narrow child protection towards meeting children's developmental needs in partnership with their family and carers. *The Assessment Framework for Children in Need and their Families* (AF) developed within this holistic paradigm. It is used to analyse the data in the thesis, because it encapsulated developmental understandings, produced over time, about the needs of children and their families in their social environments. By 2006, early criticisms, from academics (for example, Garrett 2003) that the AF was formulaic were being moderated by the findings of other studies (Horwath 2002, Joyce 2003, Platt 2006) showing how practitioners were creatively using the tool with families. However, in the meantime, the increasingly important role of education and a move to integrating services was dominating policy agendas and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) became the designated department for overseeing children's services.

The death of Victoria Climbié in 2000, and the subsequent inquiry report (Cm5730 2003) became the rationale for the introduction of a new government policy

initiative, Every Child Matters. Arguably, policy paradigms are fickle creations, driven as much by a particular government's need to be seen to do something after a particular scandal or crisis as by careful thinking about the needs of children and their families. Sometimes, political ideology appears to drive one aspect at the expense of others. Therefore, to some extent the connection between the outcomes of the report into the death of Victoria Climbié and the breadth of recent policy change, may be seen as coincidental. Labour's modernisation agenda and broad approach to children's services was already in train before the inquiry reported and is the main driver for change.

Victoria Climbié's situation presented specific issues about private fostering and how children sent from overseas to the care of unsupervised relatives might be maltreated and the importance of good interagency communication. It is also worth noting that many of the key messages of the Climbié inquiry repeat those of many other child death reports - for example, about listening to children, communication failings, good relationship skills and especially the need to further develop the skills of the child care workforce to deliver better services, as much as they identify the need for a new policy direction. There will continue to be a need for creative practice that builds relationships with parents, carers and especially children and young people as described in this thesis. Best practice crosses and transcends shifting policy.

Following a spate of policy papers from government (DfES 2004, 2004a), the Children Act 2004 introduced children's services authorities in local government order to achieve the required integration of agencies through the creation of strategic partnerships. Each area must respond by creating children's trusts by 2008. Although there are guidance documents, there is no particular blueprint as to how an authority will bring all local partners, such as health education, libraries, police, housing etc, together to form a strategic partnership. The challenge for each area will be how to bring policy into practice at local level in the best way for children, their families and those who work with them. Section 11 of the Children Act 2004 reaffirmed interagency collaboration for children in need under the 1989 Children Act and placed a duty on agencies to work together to safeguard children through local safeguarding boards. Other developments such the revised Working Together (DfES,

2006) and the Integrated Children's System reinforce the drive towards good interdisciplinary action and information sharing in child protection cases.

The government has also set a target of providing 3,500 children's centres by 2010 to evolve from existing support provision such as Sure Start and family centres. The Children Care Act 2006 aims to 'transform' early years provision and there are proposals for the Children Bill 2008. This further sets the scene for a child care policy strategy that aims to support children from their early years through to adulthood, by detailing how the new range of childcare, early years and extended schools services will be available to parents. The fact that a children's commissioner has now been appointed might also mean that children's voices are better heard. All these developments link education, health, social work, social care and other aspects of children's services more closely. In the same way the findings in the thesis, about the benefits of parents reading with children, and the relevance to varied aspects of development and attainment, cross disciplines and are relevant to all practitioners working to promote children's optimal development and improve their life chances.

The managerial approach introduced by the Conservative administrations in the 1990s, followed by New Labour's modernisation agenda, led to the target and outcomes frameworks that are now pervasive in health, education and social care. The children's outcomes framework in Every Child Matters can therefore be seen as part of the modernisation project. Often targets and performance indicators are helpful, making practice transparent and authorities accountable. However, they can also become too detailed and restrictive, arguably, creating as many blocks and barriers as they deliver good outcomes. Often practitioners are overwhelmed by paperwork and struggle to keep their creativity and relationships with children and families paramount. Practitioners have also questioned the relevance of some targets to families (Tunstall et al. 2006).

The risk of the new policy framework is that this emphasis on how authorities deliver services to promote certain outcomes for children, may squeeze out the central role of ordinary positive parenting and parents' views. The government's emphasis on encouraging and supporting parents to work, providing more day and after school care and measuring children against stated outcomes, while desirable in some aspects, runs the risk of marginalising the benefits of supporting good enough

ordinary parenting whether parents work or not. A policy which rests on more children spending more time in the care of non-parents is also questionable. New Labour's approach to children and their families has been described as state investment with an emphasis on children's future as citizens, rather than their wellbeing as children per se (Featherstone, 2006).

Further, the emphasis on targeting parents whose parenting is deemed lacking, through compulsory parent training programmes and court orders, focuses on a few parents. This may stigmatise parent training and support programmes in the minds of others who might voluntarily and at an early stage seek help. There is a delicate balance between promoting 'good' outcomes and judging 'poor' performance, which when done in a critical spirit in the arena of family life will be experienced very negatively by parents and children. The apparent 'compulsoriness' of much policy and intervention aimed at families may prove difficult for practitioners who aim to work in partnership with families. While the creation of classes to teach parents to read with children is not a suggested outcome of this work, a firm implication of it is that all those who work with children can bring about positive change and enhance parenting capacity, by their example and encouragement, and by specific interventions using children's literature and by promoting the ordinary activity of child-parent reading, but in creative partnership with families.

Approaches towards child care are influenced by wider policy changes. Although the commissioning and providing arrangements introduced by the Conservatives influenced children's services, the AF developed, relatively independently, from a research-based developmental literature, which was arguing against a protectionist paradigm and for one of earlier and holistic intervention. The modernisation agenda of New Labour and the restructuring of services is an ambitious programme of reform, with five broad desirable outcomes, within which nest some very focused targets and indicators. It is these latter which shift the focus to certain key areas for intervention which might have meant that the strengths of the ecological and holistic AF could have been lost. Fortunately, whatever the policy frameworks, psychological necessities for children, such as emotional warmth and attachment will continue to be critical for the development of children who will become emotionally and social competent adults, who can parent in their turn. Thus attention to the domains

articulated in the AF will still be needed if practitioners are to assess the extent to which children will achieve the ECM outcomes.

In any case, The Common Assessment Framework (DfES 2005) and the Integrated Children's System introduced in 2006 retain the AF dimensions at the centre and the AF will also continue to be used for specialist assessment by social workers. This continuing attention to the key AF aspects of parenting (emotional warmth, basic care, ensuring safety, stimulation, guidance and boundaries and stability) means that the evidence that parental reading with children is beneficial to those dimensions makes them also capable of enhancing the new framework. Therefore, although child care policy has shifted, the established ideas about parenting capacity, articulated in the thesis, remain embedded in the current broad framework for multi agency practice.

Parental capacity, and supporting it, is a necessary part of any child care policy, and has been a particular practice focus over the years in family and parent centres, such as those who took part in this study and those discussed by Tunstall and colleagues (2006). It will be important in this new policy environment to build on the legacy of past effective practice in supporting children and families. Parent and child reading together is part of this legacy. The broad aims of the Every Child Matters framework are such that it is not difficult to argue the case for a continued scrutiny of the place of reading and literature in relation to children, parenting and other areas of children's services. The testing of the usefulness of reading with children against the AF parenting capacity dimensions, together with the collection of data from parents about the outcomes from reading with children, has demonstrated that parents, practitioners and children reading together can be beneficial to child's emotional and mental health, sense of safety and security, enjoyment and sense of achievement and their ability to contribute to society, as expressed by the ECM outcomes framework. Additionally, the use of reading with children may mitigate the narrowness of some of the targeted outcomes framework, especially as the target indicators for ECM do not devalue the parenting capacity dimensions of the AF.

The usefulness of the broad ECM outcomes is not easily questioned. Who would not want children to be healthy; stay safe; enjoy and achieve; make a positive contribution; achieve economic well being? These are desirable goals and the

government's drive to improve children's lives is to be welcomed. The test will be how this is done and creative practitioners and parents will read with children as part of developing enjoyment and achievement, for emotional health and learning to manage the world safely.

This study deliberately focused on ordinary parenting, while identifying the role that good social and economic support from wider environments and positive family ties have in helping families to raise children. Additionally, the ordinary reading together that families 'just do' within diverse social and economic groupings has been shown to have a pivotal place in building child resilience and positive parental capacities. This activity therefore may be more and more important in being a positive way of intervening within what appear to be challenging times for some parents. It may also be an area where professionals from different backgrounds can have a common understanding. A theme of this thesis is also that building these capacities can be subliminal and also fun, something often missing in policy paradigms. Every child's reading with their parent matters, will contribute to their well being and enhance the child development outcomes contained in any policy framework.

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